
Stream of Consciousness, a Literary Technique in William Faulkner's Fictions

Ms. M. Parvathi, Asst. Professor of English (parvathi.malepati@gmail.com)
Madanapalle Institute of Technology & Science, Madanapalle, A. P., India

Dr. P. kusuma Harinath,
Professor, Department of English, S. V. University, Tirupati, A P, India

Abstract

William Faulkner is a Nobel Laureate with his literary reputation for novels, short stories and screenplays. He created his characters based on factors such as history, family, race, class, gender relations of American South. William Faulkner used the narrative style, the stream-of-consciousness that is well-known for his experiments. Stream of consciousness is a phrase coined by William James in his Principles of Psychology (1890) to describe the narrative methods. Faulkner has used the literary technique called 'Stream of Consciousness' to explore and expose the unspoken thoughts of his characters. He used it to the extreme to give the readers the best fiction of his times.

Keywords: Literary Technique, Narrative Style, Stream-Of-Consciousness

Introduction

William Faulkner is one of the greatest American novelists of the twentieth century and a Nobel Laureate, with his literary reputation for novels, short stories and screenplays. Faulkner was born on September 25, 1897 in New Albany, Mississippi. He was brought up in Oxford, Mississippi, the oldest of four brothers. His father, Murry Cuthbert Faulkner and mother, Maud Butler hailed from wealthy families, but they lived in poverty because of the Civil War (1861–65; a war fought between the Northern and Southern states of the United States). A great-grandfather, Colonel William Falkner, had written The White Rose of Memphis, a popular novel of the 1880s. William was named in honor of his great-grandfather.

William Faulkner was a creative writer and popular for his literary works in his lifetime. There were his fictional works approximately 1,200 named persons found in 19 novels and 94 short stories. Six volumes of his short stories were published during his lifetime. Faulkner seems to

produce his best work when writing about his imaginary Yoknapatawpha County which is a mythical county in Northern Mississippi, the author's own locale, is inhabited by characters that Faulkner has created in the image of the people who actually live there, or who have lived there. Several characters of Faulkner are archetypal folk types - as the Southern plantation owner, the peddler or drummer, the country storekeeper, the tenant farmer, the farmer's wife, the moonshiner, the horse trader, and the Negro servant. Tall tales, anecdotes, and yarns are another form of folklore used by Faulkner, and in colorful local dialect, these characters make wisecracks, quote proverbs, and make humorous conversations. He created his characters based on factors such as history, family, race, class, gender relations of American South that was presented, in contrast to its historical picture based.

William Faulkner is one of the most influential writers in modern American literature. Specifically his works reflect the distinct heritage of the American South. The Northern region of Mississippi where Faulkner lived all his life provided the geographical and cultural background for the county of his novels and short stories. The great Southern writer of the Yoknapatawpha County, he is identified with the American South and it is quite natural that his fiction is filled with references to history, geography, customs, and his prose often employs its special idiom. American South has become the rich setting for his novels and short stories.

William Faulkner has excelled in inventing the fictional and imaginary land, which became the solid basis for his literary work. Experimentation and imagination laid Faulkner to find the Yoknapatawpha County. His major concern is to reflect his County in the form of fiction. He is also a writer with technical excellence. He used it to the extreme to give the readers the best fiction of his times.

In his fictions, he created a number of characters, themes, plots, issues and incidents with local emphasis, and even insignificant details were managed to make universal. William Faulkner used the narrative style, the stream-of-consciousness that is well-known for his experiments. This style is characterized by a use of language imitating thought, often eliminating conventional grammar and formal sentence structure in favor of more “organic” and creative modes.

Stream of Consciousness, a Literary Technique

Stream of consciousness is a literary technique, used primarily in poetry and fiction, which seeks to portray an individual's point of view by giving the written equivalent of the character's thought processes, either in a loose internal interior monologue, or in connection to his or her sensory reactions to external occurrences.

(New World Encyclopedia)

'Stream of Consciousness' is defined as "a person's thoughts and conscious reactions to events, perceived as a continuous flow." The term was introduced by William James in his *Principles of Psychology* (1890). It is a literary style in which a character's thoughts, feelings, and reactions are depicted in a continuous flow uninterrupted by objective description or conventional dialogue. James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Marcel Proust are among its notable early exponents.

This technique was developed significantly in *Ulysses* (1922) and *Finnegan's Wake* (1939) by the Irish novelist and poet James Joyce. This technique is brilliantly used by the British novelist Virginia Woolf in her novels like *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), and *To the Light House* (1927). The technique of 'Stream of Consciousness' tries to portray the distant, preconscious state that exists prior to the mind's organized sensations. As a result, the re-creation of a 'Stream of Consciousness' often seems to be lacking the explicit cohesion, unity, and selectivity of direct thought or idea.

The Oxford Companion to English literature records, "Stream of consciousness is a phrase coined by William James in his *Principles of Psychology* (1890) to describe the narrative methods whereby certain novelists describe the unspoken thoughts and feelings of their characters without resorting to objective or conventional dialogue."

'Stream of Consciousness' is a literary technique used to describe the multitudinous thoughts and feelings of the human mind. Joseph Warren Beach says, "The Stream of Consciousness is a kind of Epidemic that has left its stamp upon modern fiction in English; and then he says:

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

Stream of Consciousness in William Faulkner's Fictions

Faulkner created a large number of characters in his novels and stories. In this regard, he was unrivalled and he was influenced by Edgar Allan Poe, James Joyce and T. S. Eliot in creation of his themes and characterization. He is an illustrious writer of the 20th century, but he inherited much of the characteristics of early American novelists and story-tellers. His main theme is 'man and his surroundings' so that he wrote about his land and about his people. In his popular novels and short stories Faulkner presented the South, the locale of most of his fiction. In his Nobel Award acceptance speech Faulkner threw light on the main theme in his fiction, that is, the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself. He writes about primary human emotions—love and honour and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice. He had faith in man.

The problem of point of view in Faulkner's works embraces some of his fictional techniques. Faulkner was highly influenced by Joseph Conrad and James Joyce. *The Unvanquished* (1940) and *The Reivers* (1962) are told entirely from the single point of view but in other works, Faulkner has used a multiplicity of points of view. He makes effective use of first person narration, third person narration, and Stream of Consciousness technique.

His use of characterization, narration, foreshadowing, and symbolism are the four key factors which make Faulkner's work to be idealistic and something new to all readers. In some of his novels, Faulkner does not set the events according to the conventional natural and scientific lines; he merges the past, present, and the future with one another. Through the Stream of Consciousness technique he allows his readers to penetrate into the depth of his characters' minds. Thus, he disintegrates the conventional concept of narration. Faulkner has been frequently criticized for the obscurity and difficulty created by his narrative techniques, but the accomplishment of most of his works is due to these techniques.

A literary technique called "stream of consciousness" is skillfully employed by Faulkner. This technique captures the graveness of the situation and exposes the unspoken thoughts of his characters. In *The Sound and the Fury*, successfully he uses this technique. Faulkner's characters are often engaged in dramatic actions, the dream like effect creates quietness, a stillness which generates a sense of the relaxed, slow moving South.

As I Lay Dying (1930) is nevertheless a masterfully written successor to *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). As with the earlier work, the novel focuses on a family and is told in Stream of Consciousness style by different narrators, but rather than an aristocratic family. The focus in this novel is on the lower-class farm laborers from Southern Yoknapatawpha County, the Bundrens, whose matriarch, Addie Bundren was dead and before her death she had asked to be buried in Jefferson, ‘a nine days’ hard ride away’ to the north. The journey to Jefferson is loaded with perils of fire and flood (from the rain-swollen Yoknapatawpha River) as well as the family members’ inner feelings of grief and loss.

Faulkner has used the literary technique called ‘Stream of Consciousness’ to explore and expose the unspoken thoughts of his characters. The term Stream of Consciousness was first employed by William James, the American philosopher and psychologist, in his book *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) to express the “unbroken flow of feelings and thoughts in the waking mind,”(James. 1890) since then, it has now been adopted to describe a narrative method in the modern fiction. For example, Darl Bundren in *As I Lay Dying*, thinks:

I am I and you are you and I know it and you don't know it and you could do so much for me if you just would and if you just would then I could tell you and then nobody would have to know it except you and me and Darl (Faulkner, As I Lay Dying 50).

In *The Sound and the Fury* when Quentin Compson remembers:

A face reproachful tearful an odor of camphor and of tears a voice weeping steadily and softly beyond the twilight door the twilight-colored smell of honeysuckle (Faulkner, The Sound and the Fury 58)

These thoughts of the waking mind are the perfect examples of ‘Stream of Consciousness’ which is a literary technique widely used in narrative fiction to show subjective as well as objective reality. It reveals the character's thoughts, feelings, and actions, often following an associative rather than a logical sequence.

Conclusion

'Stream of Consciousness', the term was introduced by William James in his *Principles of Psychology* (1890). It is a literary style in which a character's thoughts, feelings, and reactions

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