

The Stream of Consciousness Technique

An Introduction to Fiction defines stream of consciousness as “a kind of selective omniscience: the presentation of thoughts and sense impressions in a lifelike fashion—not in a sequence arranged by logic, but mingled randomly.” Psychologist William James first coined the term “stream of consciousness” in his book *Principles of Psychology* (1890) to describe the way humans respond to daily life through thought and emotion.

One of the most important choices an author faces when choosing a point of view is the ability to manipulate the distance between the novel’s characters and the reader. Early writers of fiction had mostly limited themselves to presenting a character’s thoughts and feelings through action or dialogue with other characters. Stream of consciousness writing was first used in the late nineteenth century by writers hoping to break away from the formality of Victorian literature. The technique was a bold innovation that allowed readers to experience emotional, moral, and intellectual thought from inside a character’s head and opened up new possibilities for point of view beyond traditional first or third person narration.

Many of the first writers to use stream of consciousness were modernists such as James Joyce (1882–1941), Virginia Wolff (1882–1941), D. H. Lawrence (1885–1930), and William Faulkner (1897–1962). In their realistic writing, they strived to portray characters, events, and settings in plausible, authentic ways.

Stream of consciousness writing allows an author to create the illusion that the reader is privy to sensations and uncensored thoughts within a character’s mind before the character has ordered them into any rational form or shape. These

thoughts are often portrayed through *direct interior monologue*, the presentation of a character’s thoughts as if he or she were speaking aloud. The narrator disappears, if only for a moment, and the character’s thoughts and emotions take over. Interior monologue lays bare the character’s private ideas and feelings. The way a character thinks—either scattered and disorganized or logical and orderly—provides clues to the character’s mental condition, intellect, and emotional stability.

Like modernist writers in Europe and America, Naguib Mahfouz combined realism and stream of consciousness narration to great effect. *The Thief and the Dogs* pioneered psychological realism in Arabic fiction. Access to Said Mahran’s internal experiences enhances the reader’s understanding of his external reality. In the novel’s first chapter Said thinks of his daughter Sana: “I wonder how much the little one even knows about her father? Nothing, I suppose. No more than this road does, these passersby or this molten air.” Yet, he is ultimately unprepared for the child’s refusal of his affection. Moments later he asks himself, “Doesn’t she know how much I love her?” Seeing Said’s nervous anticipation and his eventual reaction to Sana’s rejection gives the reader clues as to how Said might react to challenges later in the novel.

Through stream of consciousness writing and internal monologue, the reader views Said’s struggle to control his circumstances. As his burning desire for revenge carries him closer to self-destruction, his thoughts become less rational, his emotions increasingly volatile. He tells himself, “Think only about what you’ve got to do now, waiting here, filled with bitterness, in this murderous stifling darkness.” Alone and desperate, Said commits to a course of action that will bring either salvation or death.