

Stream of Consciousness in William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*

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Abstract

Stream of consciousness is a narrative technique which is distinguished from any other type of narration by its flow of thoughts and images that may lack a coherent structure. The plot of the literary fictional work which adopts such narrative mode, may be woven in or out of time and place.

Writers who resort to using stream of consciousness focus on the emotional and the psychological processes that are taking place in the minds of one or more characters. William Faulkner in his most famous novel *As I Lay Dying*, uses the stream of consciousness point of view to convey not only the impressions and the feelings of his characters, but also the world which those characters inhabit.

This paper focuses on the stream of consciousness as a fictional narrative technique, as well as the way and the purpose behind using such technique by William Faulkner in his novel *As I Lay Dying*.

This paper tackles the psychological and the literary definitions of stream of consciousness and how it is transferred from psychology to literature. Moreover, it sheds light on the personal and the literary life-sketch of Faulkner and the way he employs stream of consciousness as a narrative technique to explore fully the impressions, and the actions of *As I Lay Dying*'s characters.

Stream of Consciousness: An Overview

Man's thoughts do not often take the form of a language. People usually think without uttering words and the mind works with concepts instead of words. William James—an American philosopher and psychologist, compares these thoughts to a river: "The stream of our thought is like a river. On the whole easy simple flowing predominates...But at intervals an obstruction, a set-back, a log-jam occurs, stops the current, creates an eddy, and makes things move the other way." (James: 42) James states that thought is something that goes on within each personal consciousness, and it can't be divided into bits, on the contrary, it flows like a stream. (Ibid.)

There is a metaphoric image in which James compares the stream of thought to a bird that has alternative flights. The places of flight are "the transitive parts, of the stream of thought" (Ibid.: 243). The transitive parts, as James explains, are the places of the flight of the flux account for the unity of thought. (Ibid.)

James' philosophy, gave rise to a modern novel technique: The stream of consciousness was pioneered by Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and William Faulkner.

According to literary criticism, J. A. Cuddon defines stream of consciousness as "...that technique which seeks to depict the multitudinous thoughts and feelings which pass through the mind". (Cuddon:661). On the other hand, Thomas R. Arp states that stream of consciousness is a narrative technique which "presents the apparently random thoughts going through a character's head within a certain period of time, mingling memory and present experiences, and employing transitional links that are psychological rather than strictly logical." (Arp:230)

Stream of consciousness, at any rate, becomes among the most important characteristics of the modern novel and the clear mark of its difference from the nineteenth century realist novel. Virginia Woolf is among the most famous writers who are known for their stream of consciousness novels. One of Woolf's dreams is that:

if a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could base his work upon his own feelings and not upon conventions, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted sense (Walter Allen:7)

Woolf's dream came into being in her fictional works. In her most famous novel *To the Light House*, for example, the development of the plot doesn't take place according to what is going to happen next, but rather moves forward through a series of scenes arranged according to a sequence of selected moments of consciousness. Moreover, the development of events is not the most important thing in this novel. What is important is the characters' consciousness response to these events. In other words, all the stated events appear by way of reflection in the consciousness of the characters. Daniel S. Burt States:

Her[Woolf] use of stream of consciousness technique allows her to reveal the characters' flow of thoughts and takes the reader into the consciousness of the characters in the novel. This technique makes the reader step into the inner worlds of the characters through their feelings, thoughts, and memories. 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. (Burt:95)

James Joyce in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*; uses the stream of consciousness narrative mode to bring the reader psychologically closer to Stephen's mind. Joyce's *A portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is described by Gary Day as a novel of psychological realism. He describes it so as it is evident that the entire story revolves resolutely on its main character, Stephen Dedalus whom the Joyce tackles the journey of his life since childhood up to manhood in such a realistic way (Day:104) Everything in this novel is described through the thoughts, sensation, and the consciousness of its protagonist. The language and the expressions which Dedalus speaks with are fit for the different stages that his age passes by. For example the following lines explore Stephen's thoughts and conscious experience when he is just a child "Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road and this moocow that was coming down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo."(Joyce:5) In these lines Joyce is describing the scene through the eyes of a very young boy. The language of the sentence is associated with children such as "moocow," "tuckoo," and "nicens." There is no stop in this sentence as if his thoughts are just like a train. This train of thought is another indication that this sentence is of a child.

As the action of the novel develops and Stephen becomes younger, his consciousness grows older to be fit for his age. Stephen's feelings, whether when he is a child or a young person, are expressed and conveyed through symbols. The rose and its colour, for example, stand for the young man's quest for romance and beauty, while the white and ivory colours, which join him

since his childhood up to manhood stand for his feelings of dampness, coldness, and loneliness.

The point of view through which any novelist narrates his fictional work measures the distance between the characters and the reader. The earliest types of point of view had mostly limited the narrator who presented character's thought and feelings through action and dialogue. Stream of consciousness breaks down such limitation and allows the reader to experience emotional, moral, and intellectual thoughts inside the character's mind. Moreover, the consciousness of the characters flows freely and naturally among present, past, and future from one thing or person to another. Thus, the time space limitation vanishes in such a way that enables the reader to step into the inner world of the characters by their feelings, thought, and memories.

William Faulkner: The Man & The Novelist

William Faulkner (1897-1962) is one of the major innovative figures of contemporary American literature. He wrote novels and short stories combining stream-of-consciousness narrative technique with linguistic innovations and vivid characterization. His better known novels include The Sound and the Fury, Absalom Absalom!, and As I Lay Dying.

William Faulkner was born and spent most of his life in New Albany, Mississippi, where he has set most of his novels, and to which he refers as Yoknapatawpha county. Robert N. Brown states that:

William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha county is not a real place; no map of Mississippi reveals such a location. Through this fictional country Faulkner explores the parallels in landscape and historical

geography between Faulkner's fictional Yoknapatawpha County (with its county seat, Jefferson) and Faulkner's actual home of Oxford, Mississippi, located in Lafayette County. (Brown: 287)

Yoknapatawpha novels spanned the decades of economic decline after the American Civil War. Racism, class division, family as both life force and curse, feelings of despair and alienation are the recurring themes in these novels. The reason behind choosing this region to be the setting for many of his novels is that Faulkner as a writer wants to: "probe his own region, the deep South... The county is a microcosm of the South as a whole, and Faulkner's novels examine the effects of the dissolution of traditional values and authority on all levels of Southern society"(The Columbia Encyclopedia: 16861)

In school, Faulkner had no interest in academic studies. Instead he enjoyed playing football and reading. His interest in literature initially took place when he was introduced to the works of John Keats, Sherwood Anderson and the Imagist poets at the hands of his friend Phil Stone who was four years older than him.

Faulkner quit school in 11th grade. He tried to be enlisted in the United States Army but was refused because he didn't meet height requirements. Later on, Faulkner trained in Canada as a cadet pilot in the Royal Air Force in 1918, attended the university of Mississippi in 1919–20, and lived in Paris briefly in 1925. In 1931 he bought a pre-Civil War mansion, "Rowanoak," in Oxford, Miss., where he lived, a virtual recluse, for the rest of his life.

Though Faulkner's works were published as early as 1919, and largely during 1920 and 1930, he was relatively unknown until receiving the 1949 Nobel Prize in literature. His death was the result of a horse-riding accident in which he suffered serious injuries.

Faulkner was a good observer of what he is surrounded by. Thus his novels deal with many aspects of humanism. His novels deal with tragedy, energy, and humor of ordinary human life. In other words, William Faulkner is primarily interested in man who is in conflict against himself, against his fellow man, against his time and place, and against his environment. Peter Swiggart states the following:

The conflict that provide tension and suspense in the typical Faulkner's novel are as likely to be conflicts of meaning and epistemological projection as they are likely to be conflicts of will or intention. At least, conflicts of will or intentions are almost demonstrated by Faulkner's narrative to flow directly from primary acts of conflicting signification. (Swiggart: 95)

Whatever the kind of conflict that Faulkner deals with in his novels, it is the conflict of man who is the product of a particular set of historical circumstances against which he must struggle to form a new form of world that is independent from what he is told or given. In such a world man can express his own vitality and mark his own place.

The most remarkable feature of Faulkner's fictional style, is his use of stream of consciousness narrative technique. John Bassett states that: "Mr. Faulkner seeks to get at the essence of his characters thought. He is carrying on an experiment that he has

widened the boundaries of modern fiction"(Bassett:94) Faulkner in many of his novels has imitated the way man's brain produces flow of images and thoughts. The difference is that Faulkner interprets this flow of images and thoughts and puts them in the form of words. He places the reader inside the head of his characters in such a way that skillfully creates a sense of woven continuity inside each novel. In other words, Faulkner may let one of his complex sentences run on for more than a page. He juggled time, spliced narratives, experimented with multiple narrators, and interrupted simple stories with rambling, stream-of consciousness soliloquies.

As I Lay Dying: An Overview

As I Lay Dying is Faulkner's fifth novel and consistently ranked among the best novels of 20th century. It is a story that deals with a family's loss of their mother and a journey that they under-go to grant her request of being buried with her kin. The family consists of Addie Bundren, her husband Anse, and their children, Cash, Darl, Jewel, Dewey Dell, and Vardaman. The entire novel is based on a nine day escapade, that on the surface appears to fill the mother's request, but in reality it is an excuse for them to travel to town for their own personal reasons. Throughout the journey they encounter many obstacles such as flooded rivers, over turning wagons, injuries, and other strenuous circumstances.

As I Lay Dying takes place in the northern part of Mississippi in 1928. The Bundrens must travel forty miles to bury Addie in Jefferson, the primary town in Faulkner's fictional Yoknapatawpha County. The Bundrens live in a time of economic hardship for cotton farmers, who have to suffer through a depressed cotton market, disastrously heavy rains, and lacking of modern farming equipment.

The social environment of this novel features a code of ethics that obligates farm families to house and feed travelers, although the Bundrens refuse such assistance. Faulkner also depicts a natural environment that is at best indifferent and at worst actively hostile, bringing floods, heat, and intrusive buzzards.

Stream of Consciousness in *As I Lay Dying*

Faulkner in *As I Lay Dying* uses stream of consciousness to transfer ideas, thoughts, and perspectives inside the characters' head to the mind of the reader: "The Lord can see into the heart. If it is His will that some folks has different ideas of honesty from other folks, it is not my place to question His decree" (Faulkner:10) In addition, Faulkner through this narrative technique focuses on the nature of human communication and relationships since most of the events take place in the character's mind, with little verbal dialogue and narration:

Where every breath she draws is full of his knocking and sawing where she can see him saying See. See what a good one I am making for you. I told him to go somewhere else. I said Good God do you want to see her in it. It's like when he was a little boy and she says if she had some fertilizer she would try to raise some flowers and he taken the bread-pan and brought it back from the barn full of dung(Ibid:15)

Moreover, many of the themes that Faulkner deals with in this novel are explored through the stream of consciousness technique. Theme of death is one of the major themes that Faulkner tackles in this novel which from its title one can smell this theme: "I can remember how when I was young I believed death to be a phenomena of the body; now I know it to be merely a function of

the mind-and that of the minds of the ones who suffer the bereavement"(Ibid.:37)

As I Lay Dying consists of fifty-nine chapters narrated by different characters. Darl is the most frequent voice, narrating nineteen chapters; some characters, like Addie Bundren, Jewel Bundren, and various townspeople, narrate only one chapter. Many chapters appear to unfold as events take place, particularly those narrated by the Bundrens; others relate events that occurred in the past.

The process of narration in this novel can be compared to a football game. First Darl speaks, and then Cora, and then Darl again, and then Jewel. Here, one may ask about the reason behind shifting narration from one character to another. The answer simply is that Faulkner wants to present varying and often contradictory versions of the same event. As a result the reader will be the jury who will decide what actually happened and who's telling the truth and who isn't. Clearly, what Faulkner is conveying here is not absolute Truth but a truth that depends in large measure on viewpoint. Judith Lockyer comments: "...by reading the narrators' unspoken thoughts, the readers are able to judge the Bundren's personality from their conducts throughout the story"(Lockyer: 73) Another reason for this shifted narration is that Faulkner probably wants to explore the way the characters are isolated from each others despite the fact that they are living in the same place. This is firmed by Lockyer: " Addie has been isolated and deceived by what was once an absolute faith in words. The unbearable gap between word and deed has emptied her of feeling and the world of meaning."(Ibid.:74)

The characters of *As I Lay Dying* explore the difficulty of human communication, caused not only by the problem of finding the right word but also by the discrepancy between words and

deeds. Addie Bundren expresses this theme most distinctly when she says that “words are no good; that words don’t ever fit even what they are trying to say at.”(Faulkner:136) We quickly discover that Addie is not the only character in the novel who feels this way. Others particularly Vardaman, Darl, Cash, and Dewey Dell also have difficulty in communicating their innermost thoughts and relating words to deeds.

All the events of this novel spring from the mother's death and her desire to be buried in Jefferson which is reflected through the use of stream of consciousness. This desire is linked with many themes like the theme of death and with many concepts like the concept of a journey, which is not limited by the characters' journey to Jefferson. It is also the reader's journey which he takes deep inside the complex, conflicted, and often nightmarish thoughts of the characters.

Addie Bundern

The character of Addie Bundern is presented to the reader through narration of the other characters in the novel, including her husband and her children. Faulkner presents Addie as a woman who is driven to bitterness, despair and longing for death by the discrepancy between the reality of her situation and the expectancy of her dreams. When she fails to fulfill her hopes and aspiration, she longs for death. She lays in her bed, watches the making of her coffin, and waits for death. Her feelings of despair, push her strongly towards "Refusing (the living] in the same earth with those Bundern". "it was her own wish" to die—a wish that prevents her from recognizing the fact that "A woman's place is with her husband and children, alive or dead". Addie is presented as a woman who

decides to die alone, "hiding her pride and her broken heart. Glad to go".

The question is: what is the reason behind such feelings of bitterness? What are the things that make her unable to find in life a state of being, and of wholeness? Why does she come to see that there is no place in life and no "self" in life—where can one simply be? The answer for all these questions is her feelings of incompetence. She fails to be a successful wife, a successful mother, and a successful teacher.

Amado Chan proclaims that:

Addie's incompetence is reflected by her marriage with Anse, a good for nothing male who disgraces both the traditional and modern concepts of manhood. Addie's inability to marry a gentleman with vision and the will to be productive marks her degree of incompetence that leads her to her deathbed.(Chan:118)

Addie believes that a woman can make a difference in man's life, but when she fails to fulfill this with her husband, she is led to the feelings of incompetence and frustration. She is aware that Anse does not take care of his physical appearance. He does not cut his hair, and he cannot hold his shoulder up. She tells Anse, "If you've got any women folks, why in the world don't they make you get your hair cut ... and make you hold your shoulders up" (Faulkner:135). Her incompetence, therefore is marked by her failure to change Anse whose means of survival is solely based on the kindness of his neighbors and God. Because Addie's husband can neither satisfy her expectations of companionship to free her from aloneness, nor can he fulfill her sexual drive, she considers him dead when he lies beside her in bed. She comments that her

husband's attempts at sexual intercourse make no difference in her life.

Furthermore, Addie's children are living proofs of her incapability of fulfilling her role as a mother. Each of her children's personality is marked by a lack of love, caring, and attention. While their mother is lying in her deathbed, none of them worries about getting her medical attention. Each of them, including their father, seems to be solely preoccupied with his or her selfish motivations. Whereas Dewey Dell is worried about her pregnancy and anticipated abortion, and Cash is concerned about doing a perfect bevel on her coffin, Darl worries about making an extra three dollars and keeping Jewel away from Addie.

Her incompetence is reflected also through the way she hates her students. She comments that she cannot wait for the last of them to leave and thus be free to go to the spring, which serves to her as a source of relaxation and retreat. She says:

In the afternoon when the school was out and the last one had left with his little dirty snuffling nose, instead of going home I would go down the hill to the spring where I could be quiet and hate them...I would look forward to the times when they faulted, so I could whip them. (Ibid.:134)

Addie reaches a level of hatred to all those who surround her that make her hates her father who "have ever planted" her. Basically, Addie's failure to love her husband, prevents her from achieving a satisfactory identity. This Perhaps is what make Addie's children victims of her frustrated and unfulfilled relationship with Anse. Consequently, she decides to revenge. Her revenge takes the form of committing sin of adultery with Whitfield, the Church Minister, laying on bed waiting for death, and being

buried in Jefferson. The forms of her revenge indicate the way she is isolating herself from her family, and being isolated is what Faulkner tries to explore through the use of stream of consciousness. By committing adultery she is isolating herself from being a faithful wife for Anse. Amado Chan confirms that: " her sexual affair with the Church Minister may be interpreted as a form of revenge, for she sees Whitfield as the forbidden fruit, and thus considers her adultery as a defiance to Anse's "control over her as a "wife." (Chan:118) By laying on bed waiting for death is as if she is isolating herself from being a good mother, and by being buried in Jefferson is as if she is isolating her corps from being in the same land that her family are living on. Chan explains: " Addie's defiance and revenge are embodied in her treatment of her family, and in her request to be taken back to Jefferson and to be buried with her dead relatives."(Ibid.)

Her rebellious desires push her strongly towards the need to be released. Her rebellious desires give her a sense of living and being, while living with her family makes her feel as if she is buried alive.

Among the members of her family, Jewel is her favored son. He is her relief and her salvation. When the family starts its journey to Jefferson to bury Addie, it faces many difficulties and it is about to lose the coffin but as Peter Swiggart explains :

Twice he [Jewel] saves the coffin from destruction, once when the wagon is floundering in the river and once when the coffin lies in a burning barn. His surrender of his horse toward the purchase of a second team appears to be a genuine sacrifice on his part to ensure the completion of the trip.(Swiggart:112)

Addie expresses her belief that Jewel will be her salvation when she says: " He will save me from the water and from the fire. Even though I have laid down my life, he will save me"(Faulkner:133) At the beginning, Cora thinks that Addie refers to God, but later on she realizes that Jewel is the one who is referred to: " [Addie] just sat there, lost in her vanity and her pride, that had closed her heart to God and set that selfish mortal boy in His place" (Ibid.)

To conclude, Addie's character is a product of paradoxical things. She rejects Anse's love but accepts the birth of her children. Instead of trying to escape her isolation through human relationships she wants to make it permanent by an act of temporary violation. She wants to isolate herself from others, yet she tries to impose her personality upon them. She is not pure religious but, as Cora says, "she knew about sin and salvation than the Lord God Himself" (Ibid). she believes that abstract words such as motherhood, fear, pride, and love are meaningless and must be read as an indication that she rejects her family and the mere words that unite her to it. she longs to be in the grave and her death will not be completed unless she is buried in Jefferson. Addie, as Cora describes her, is "a poor blind woman" as she couldn't see the bright side of life.

Addie's death triggers the novel's action. She is a former schoolteacher whose bitter, loveless life causes her to despise her husband and to invest all of her love in her favorite child, Jewel, rather than in the rest of her family.

As she is lay dying, all the members of her family are busy with something and their life moves continuously. This continuous movement according to Addie is not a living: "I could just remember how my father used to say that the reason for living was to get ready to stay dead a long time" (Faulkner:135). In other words, while she is about to die the physical death, her family are

already dying a spiritual death. Thus, this novel deals with two kinds of death: physical and spiritual. Spiritually, Addie is dead in life and her longing for physical death is a relief from the suffering of life. Anse, also embodies the theme of death as he is a dead person for Addie. He fails to obtain her emotionally and sexually.

Giving birth in *As I lay Dying* indicates death. For both Addie and Dewey Dell, giving birth is a phenomenon that kills the people closest to it, even if they are still physically alive. For Addie, the birth of her first child seems like a cruel trick, an infringement on her precious solitude, and it is Cash's birth that first causes Addie to refer to Anse as dead. Birth becomes for Addie a final obligation, and the last debts she must pay before preparing herself for death.

Many symbols are associated with the theme of death in *As I Lay Dying*. The coffin which is made for Addie before her death and which Addie herself watches the process of its making from the window of her room, symbolizes death. Robert Merrill believes that : " Addie's coffin comes to stand literally for the enormous burden of dysfunction that Addie's death, and circumstances in general, place on the Bundren family.(Merril:403)

In *As I Lay Dying*, the circle is associated with death. Darl states that when Addie dies, each of her eyes looks like the circular socket of a candle holder: "Her eyes are like two candles when you watch them gutter down into the sockets of iron candle-sticks" (Faulkner:7). And when Vardaman watches Addie die, his head, eyes, and mouth appear circular. Darl describes Vardaman's "round head and his eyes round and his mouth beginning to open" (Ibid.:43).

Conclusion

Writers who adopt stream of consciousness technique viewed the character as a psychological battlefield. They believed that one could best understand a person or a character by searching within his or her mind, where he or she exists in the truest sense. These writers recognized that there was another significant dimension of human beings, the unobservable subconscious, that traditional authors neglected to use when creating character personalities.

Stream of consciousness technique takes a penetrating look beneath external surface appearances to probe and explore the inner depths of the character's consciousness, and so, discover the subjective reality of the individual character. These writers wanted to depict the often unspoken stream of thoughts flowing through the character's active mind as he or she executes his or her routine activities – dining with friends, sailing on a boat, or braiding a child's hair.

William Faulkner uses stream of consciousness to make the reader as closer as he can to the unspoken thoughts of the characters. In other words, through stream of consciousness, Faulkner becomes invisible to bridge the distance between the characters and the reader.

Moreover, through stream of consciousness Faulkner explores the state of isolation of modern man. Today, people are isolated from each other, as if they don't live on the same planet. Each of them has his own affairs and does not care whether these affairs hurt or please others. The Bundrens live in virtual isolation, without a significant past and without a sense of any social role to be maintained in the world's face.

In short, Faulkner uses stream of consciousness to present his characters, to develop the action, and to explore the major themes of *As I Lay Dying*. By doing all these things, he detaches himself completely and let the reader be face to face with everything inside the novel .

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