

# Stream of Consciousness



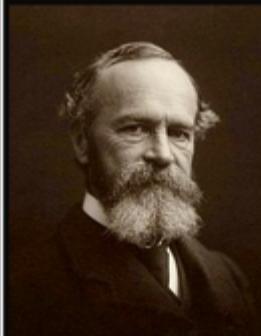
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# Origins of the Term

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❖ Philosopher and psychologist William James (brother of the author Henry James) coined the term in his 1890 book *The Principles of Psychology*.



Consciousness, then, does not appear to itself chopped up in bits...A 'river' or a 'stream' are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described. In talking of it hereafter, let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life.

(William James)

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# Origins of the term

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- ❖ May Sinclair (real name: Mary Amelia St. Clair) is credited with being the first person to use the phrase stream of consciousness in connection to literature, as it was originally a purely psychological term. She did so when reviewing a novel by Dorothy Richardson in the April 1918 issue of *The Egoist* (Kumar 14).
- ❖ It is often associated with modernist novels, though some precursors to this narrative technique can be found in the works of Edgar Allan Poe (*Tale of the Tell-Tale Heart*) and Henry James (*Portrait of a Lady*).

# What is Stream of Consciousness?

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- ❖ “...the flow of thought and awareness as it occurs from moment to moment in the mind” (Steinberg 13).
- ❖ A narrative technique that became popular during the modernist movement and is still used today.
- ❖ Literature narrated using this technique may make associative leaps between thoughts and may lack standard grammatical conventions in order to make it more true to the character’s actual thought processes.  
“Readers in the twentieth century...expect of language and syntax some kind of empirical order and completeness. Yet, if consciousness is to be represented at all convincingly, the representation must lack to a great degree these very qualities...” (Humphrey 62).

# Examples of Stream of Consciousness

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❖ The stream of consciousness technique has been used by many popular authors, including: Virginia Woolf (*Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *The Waves*, etc.), James Joyce (*Ulysses*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*), and William Faulkner (*The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*).

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❖ An excerpt from Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922): "Walk along a strand, strange land, come to a city gate, sentry there, old ranker too, old Tweedy's big moustaches leaning on a long kind of a spear. Wander through awned streets. Turbaned faces going by. Dark caves of carpet shops, big man, Turko the terrible, seated crosslegged smoking a coiled pipe. Cries of sellers in the streets. Drink water scented with fennel, sherbet. Wander along all day. Might meet a robber or two. Well, meet him. Getting on to sundown. The shadows of the mosques along the pillars: priests with a scroll rolled up. A shiver of the trees, signal, the evening wind" (Steinberg 57).

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❖ An excerpt from Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925): "She could tell nobody, not even Septimus now, and looking back, she saw him sitting in his shabby overcoat alone, on the seat, hunched up, staring. And it was cowardly for a man to say he would kill himself, but Septimus had fought; he was brave; he was not Septimus now. She put on her lace collar. She put on her new hat and he never noticed; and he was happy without her. Nothing could make her happy without him! Nothing! He was selfish. So men are. For he was not ill. Dr. Holmes said there was nothing the matter with him. She spread her hand before her. Look! Her wedding ring slipped – she had grown so thin. It was she who suffered – but she had nobody to tell" (Woolf 23).

# Works cited

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- ❧ Steinberg, Erwin. *The Stream of Consciousness and Beyond in Ulysses*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973. 13, 57. Print.
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