

The use of stream-of-consciousness technique in the dead and in the heart of dark...

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



One of the most peculiar characteristics of now famous literary works, published throughout the 20th century's early phase, is that the themes and motifs, contained in these works, reflect the essence of what was a predominant socio-philosophical discourse of the time.

In its turn, this discourse used to be largely concerned with the fact that, throughout the mentioned historical period, the newly emerged science of psychology started to people with an in-depth insight into the workings of their psyche (Kessen and Cahan 640).

Consequently, this was causing intellectually advanced individuals to assume that the particulars of how they assess the surrounding reality cannot be discussed outside of what happened to be their socially suppressed unconscious anxieties.

This, of course, created objective preconditions for many writers, to decide in favor of taking a practical advantage of the so-called 'stream-of-consciousness' narrative technique, when readers are being exposed to the flow of seemingly random semi-conscious thoughts, on the part of the featured characters - hence, gaining a better understanding of the motivations behind the concerned characters' behavior.

In my paper, I will discuss the particulars of this technique's deployment in James Joyce's short story *The Death* and in Josef Conrad's novel *The Heart of Darkness*, while elaborating on how it accentuates the discursive significance of both literary masterpieces.

Nowadays, it became a commonplace practice among literary critics to refer to Joyce's *The Death* in terms of a 'modernist story'. One of the reasons for this is that, unlike what it is being usually the case in 'Victorian stories', the manner in which the story's main character Gabriel addresses life-challenges, has very little to do with his ability to rationalize the emanations of the reality around him.

Unlike Victorian characters, Gabriel does not strive to adjust his behavior to be consistent with the provisions of the conventional morality, but rather allows his highly subjective perception of the world around him to affect the manner in which he behaves.

The validity of this suggestion can be well illustrated in regards to the scene, where overwhelmed with the sensation of an emotional discomfort towards the idea that there can be a good sense in exploring one's 'cultural roots', Gabriel simply tells Miss Ivors that he hates the country in which he happened to live.

Nevertheless, the way in which Gabriel acts makes a perfectly good logic. This is because, throughout the story's entirety, Gabriel is being represented as an individual that never ceases to remain in a close touch with his irrational emotions. In their turn, these emotions appear to derive out of the character's memories of the past, which of course justifies the author's deployment of stream-of-consciousness technique, as yet additional instrument of ensuring the perceptual plausibility of the plot.

For example, while contemplating upon what may have contributed towards his sensation of an existential inadequateness, Gabriel cannot help recalling the past-images of himself: “ He (Gabriel) saw himself as a ludicrous figure, acting as a pennyboy for his aunts, a nervous, well-meaning sentimentalist, orating to vulgarians and idealising his own clownish lusts, the pitiable fatuous fellow he had caught a glimpse of in the mirror” (Joyce 20).

Even though that, formally speaking, exposing readers to Gabriel’s self-reflective images may be considered as such that does not make much of a sense, since there is no any way for the latter to relate to these images cognitively/emotionally, this is far from being the actual case.

The reason for this is apparent - while provided with the opportunity to catch the semantically unrelated glimpses of Gabriel, throughout his life’s different phases, readers are able to gain a better understanding of the main character’s state of mind.

There is even more to it - the deployment of stream-of-consciousness technique in *The Dead*, was also meant to encourage readers to consider the possibility that, contrary to the philosophical conventions of the 19th century, the particulars of how people indulge in a rational reasoning are predetermined by the working of their unconscious.

Therefore, it will not be much of an exaggeration to suggest that, apart from adding to the plot’s plausibility, the application of stream-of-consciousness technique in the story also intended to serve the purpose of enlightening readers on how one’s mind actually works. That is, after having formulated a

particular conscious thought, people unconsciously seek to confirm this thought's soundness, in regards to what used to be the emotionally relevant circumstances, at the time of its formulation.

This explains their tendency to assess the validity of abstract ideas through the perceptually subjective lenses of their past-memories/experiences: “ He (Gabriel) wondered at his riot of emotions of an hour before. From what had it proceeded? From his aunt's supper, from his own foolish speech, from the wine and dancing, the merry-making when saying good night in the hall, the pleasure of the walk along the river in the snow” (22).

As the above-quote suggests, it is specifically the sphere of their irrational unconscious, in which people's rational thoughts actually 'reside'. Even though that, as of today, the validity of this suggestion is being commonly deemed self-evident, at the time when Joyce was working on his story, the idea that one's behavior sublimates his or her essentially unconscious angsts, was considered truly innovative.

This explains the 'modernist' status of the story in question – its themes and motifs, made even more recognizable by the author's deployment of stream-of-consciousness technique; do extrapolate Joyce's anticipation of modernity. Therefore, there is nothing odd about the fact that even today, *The Death* continues to be referred to, as such that constitutes a particularly high literary value.

Whereas, in *The Death*, the utilization of stream-of consciousness technique serves primarily the function of emphasizing the plot's plausibility, the

deployment of the same technique in Conrad's novel *The Heart of Darkness* appears to serve the function ensuring the structural integrity of the narration, concerned with Marlow's quest in the primeval jungles of Africa.

After all, Marlow's voyage into the 'heart of darkness' has a strongly defined metaphorical significance, which in turn allows us to discuss Conrad's novel, as such that it is being subliminally reflective of one's semi-conscious voyage into the dark depths of his or her unconscious psyche.

Therefore, it is fully explainable why the motif of darkness appears to be present in many of Marlow's lapses into 'consciousness-streaming', such as the following one: "I saw him extend his short flipper of an arm for a gesture that took in the forest, the creek, the mud, the river – seemed to beckon with a dishonoring flourish before the sunlit face of the land a treacherous appeal to the lurking death, to the hidden evil, to the profound darkness of its heart" (Conrad 10).

Apparently, one of the reasons why Conrad used the stream-of-consciousness technique repeatedly, throughout the novel's entirety, is that it helped him to advance the idea that one's prolonged self-reflexing is being potentially capable of driving the concerned individual towards insanity.

This the reason why, while exposed to Marlow's 'day dreaming', readers often experience a hard time, while trying to separate the de facto reality, which surrounds the character, from the one he had already been faced with (or reflected upon) in the past.

The following quotation is particularly illustrative of this statement's legitimacy: " The broadening waters flowed through a mob of wooded islands; you lost your way on that river as you would in a desert, and butted all day long against shoals, trying to find the channel, till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off for ever from everything you had known once -somewhere - far away - in another existence perhaps" (11).

After all, it does not represent much of a secret to psychiatrists, that mentally deranged individuals do seem to perceive the objective reality, as such that has the mind of its own - hence, their tendency to seek a ' hidden meaning' in just about anything they happened to focus their attention upon.

Moreover, while self-reflecting, these individuals often become overwhelmed by their deep-seated irrational fears, which in turn undermine the actual legibility of how they express their thoughts: " The reality - the reality, I tell you - fades.

The inner truth is hidden - luckily, luckily" (11). Thus, even before being introduced to the character of Kurtz, readers already have a good idea, as to what kind of person he actually is. This is because, after having been provided with a glimpse into the Marlow mind's stream-of-consciousness, they naturally conclude that the very paradigm of living in the midst of primeval wilderness, naturally affects the concerned individual's mental well-being.

Even though that the narrator's reflections upon the surrounding ' darkness' do not contain an explicit clue, as to what accounts for the actual difference

between ' savages', on the one hand, and ' civilized men', on the other, readers nevertheless do come to recognize this difference's roots.

This is because the author's deployment of stream-of-consciousness technique does suggest that, as opposed to what it is being the case with civilized individuals; savages tend to objectualize themselves within the natural environment. Allegorically speaking, they live but what they see, without being able to engage with what they see cognitively, as it would undermine their chances of a physical survival (Segal 637).

The same can be said about civilized individuals that are the path of becoming savages - they simply acknowledge what they see, without bothering to reflect upon the meaning of their visual experiences.

As Marlow noted: " We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth... as we struggled round a bend, there would be a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass-roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage" (13).

Therefore, it will not be much of an exaggeration to suggest that it was namely Conrad's masterful use of the ' stream-of-consciousness' narrative technique, which helped his novel to attain a cult-status, more than anything else did. This is because, as it was shown earlier, the deployment of this particular technique in the novel, created objective prerequisites for Conrad's literary masterpiece to be considered well ahead of its time, in the discursive sense of this word.

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