

# Disenchantment of Stream of Consciousness: Mrs. Dalloway's Brain Texts and Ethical Selection

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## Abstract

For a long time, stream of consciousness has been a controversial issue in the literary circle about whether it is a genre or a writing technique. Since its birth, stream of consciousness has been seen as the rebellion of the overstatement of the material world as well as a mysterious field. However, many works of stream of consciousness provide great opportunities for readers to reexamine the external factors not to totally escape from or give up the material world. Brain text in ethical literary criticism presents a proper perspective to understand this paradox emphasizing the biological basis of literature. In *Mrs Dalloway*, the narrator describes the “sea”, “flower”, “tree” and other objective indicators to trace the senses of main characters, which form their respective brain concepts and brain texts, as well as construct their ethical identities as well as ethical selections, which reveal the dramatic changes of western society after the First World War, in which people get lost in the sense of loneliness and alienation. Thus, stream of consciousness is not only a kind of writing technique nor a literature school, but a reconstruction attempt of ethics in the new world order.

## Keywords

*Mrs Dalloway*; Stream of consciousness; Brain text; Ethical identity; Ethical selection.

## 1. Introduction

For a long time, stream of consciousness has been a controversial issue in the literary circle about whether it is a genre or a writing technique. On the one hand, the concept of stream of consciousness was created by James, a pioneer of American functionalist psychologists. Besides, the theory of stream of consciousness is mainly based on psychology and the writers who apply stream of consciousness to their works have neither formed effective interaction nor created technical terms to explain their unique writing. Thus, it is difficult to form a literary genre for stream of consciousness in the strict sense. On the other hand, stream-of-consciousness novels often use a variety of creative methods such as inner monologues, free associations, montage stitching, symbolic art structures and so on. So stream of consciousness is also too conservative to be defined as only one creation method.

Stream-of-consciousness has been veiled with mysticism since its inception and is considered a symptom of the psychopathy of melancholy writers. The emergence of stream of consciousness is considered to be an important turning point in modern literature from focusing on the objective material world to caring for the subjective spiritual world of human beings, abandoning the specific description of objective things and emphasizing people's subjective feelings and subconscious. Although stream-of-consciousness has penetrated into the subconscious level of people, it does not mean that stream-of-consciousness novels cannot be sublimated to the level of consciousness without a teaching function. On the contrary, the stream of consciousness slowly flows from the subconscious of the character to the consciousness, which is precisely the patient guidance of the reader to naturally a more moral

and noble, a new understanding of the objective material world, and a reconstruction of the ethical order in a chaotic scene.

As one of the pioneers of stream-of-consciousness literature, Virginia Woolf has a significant and far-reaching influence on twentieth-century literature. "Woolf is not the first writer to apply stream of consciousness. Besides, she is not the last to use this technique. But she is the one who takes this technique to the pinnacle, and she dwarfs the other writers of stream of consciousness -- with the exception of Faulkner and Beckett." [1] From 1922 to 1924, Woolf spent two years creating her masterpiece *Mrs Dalloway*. Both technically and ideologically, the book has reached a state of perfection, establishing an unshakable sublime position in stream-of-consciousness fiction.

## 2. Consciousness and Stream of Consciousness

Stream-of-consciousness fiction is one of the most important forms of stream-of-consciousness literature, dating back to the late 19th century, formed in the early 20th century, and popular in the 1930s. Stream-of-consciousness novels are different from the traditional ones in terms of style and content. In fact, stream of consciousness serves as an important form of modernist literature. In terms of style, stream-of-consciousness novels break the traditional linear narrative in the order of time and space, often adopting a large-scale, multi-level, wide-angle three-dimensional narrative, inner monologues, free associations, montage stitching, and symbolic art structures. These main expression methods reflect the collapse of the traditional order and people's inner loss after the First World War.

All of these days, the literary critics has considered that stream of consciousness has been the turning point of literature from focusing on the objective material world to caring for the subjective spiritual world, being positive that stream-of-consciousness novels uncovers the subconsciousness of human beings. But this does not mean that stream-of-consciousness novels do not rise to the level of consciousness and do not have the educational function in terms of social ethics. On the contrary, the stream of consciousness slowly flows from the subconsciousness to the consciousness. Besides, it guides readers naturally towards a more moral and noble level of cognition. It is a reconstruction of order in a chaotic scene and a new understanding of the objective material world. Realist fiction is a positive narrative of brain texts, while modernist novels with stream of consciousness as an important form are reverse narratives of brain texts, deconstructing and reconstructing various brain texts that readers have formed ever. It is a true expression of the author's writing process as well as the authors' active approach to readers.

Consciousness is the cognition of cognition, and an indispensable link in the process of human self-identity selection and confirmation. Zhenzhao Nie believes that consciousness is the embodiment of the cognitive process of the human brain, the awareness and confirmation of self-feeling and thinking.[2] According to Woolf, some experiences in life are significant, shocking, and revelatory, which can be called 'being', and the material, external, and superficial life that is opposed to this is given a 'personal abbreviation' - 'non-being'." In her feelings, this "non-being" state of life is like a "cotton ball", loose and weightless, and those "moments of existence" are buried in this multitude of cotton balls that are difficult to highlight. Only the "moment of being" can reveal the truth of life as well as "hidden pattern". Thus one can grasp the essence of life. Actually, the "being" state means that a person builds an active bound with the external material world, in which one perceives the world directly, gains true senses from the objects and obtains his or her own brain concepts. Only in this way can the individual constructs his or her own brain text and makes his or her own decision about ethical identity.

### 3. Brain Concept and Brain Text

Brain concept is constituted by brain concept, which refers to a concept about concepts in the mind of human beings. The concept is the sensory institute. "The completion of the process of combining brain concepts means the end of the human thinking process, and the end of the thinking process produces thoughts and forms brain texts. Brain texts determine man's lifestyle and moral standard, man's existence, and man's essence." [3] In the novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, the author's narrative perspective is like a lens that constantly changes focus, sometimes looking at Mrs. Dalloway, sometimes observing Septimus, and what the two see, hear, and do on the same day constitute their different brain texts, and also make their different ethical choices. The symbolic artistic structure of the stream-of-consciousness novel is the figurative embodiment of the concept of the brain, while free association is the process of combining the concepts of the brain. "Sea" and "flower" are Mrs. Dalloway's most important brain concepts, around which Mrs. Dalloway is able to develop her own thinking. Mrs. Dalloway's day begins with memories and imaginations of the sea, first smelling fresh, then seeing the flap of a wave, hearing calm and stiller, until finally touching the kiss of a wave and chill and sharp, around the brain concept of "sea", Mrs. Dalloway carried out the primary perception of the senses such as smell, vision, hearing and feeling, and then the sea was fresh and free, The calm and clear perception formed an impression of freedom and calmness through Mrs. Dalloway's association, which was in stark contrast to the impetuous atmosphere of society at that time, laying the groundwork for her subsequent yearning to sink to the bottom of the sea. When Mrs Dalloway was sewing the torn green skirt, the brain concept of "sea" was awakened again through sensory feelings. The focused atmosphere reminded her of the tranquility of the sea. The smooth texture of the silk made her remember the vastness of the sea. The dexterous needle leaded make her think of the ups and downs of the waves. The sea became her spiritual sustenance in secular life. She imagined sinking into the sea and unloading all the burdens, listening to the sounds of bees flying and wowing, waves lapping at the coast and dogs barking. Until everything was getting farther and farther away from her, she was not truly free.

Another important brain concept is "flower", the author simply narrates "Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself" from a bystander's third-person perspective at the beginning of the article, and it is not until later that the flower shop arrives at the flower shop that the specific perception of the concept of "flower" begins, first smelling the sacred scent, then seeing the white, violet, red, deep orange color of flowers. Mrs. Dalloway's perception always ends with non-visual and visual, restoring the order in which the brain concepts are formed, in stark contrast to the narrative order of the brain concepts in the novels at the center of the traditional plot, from visual to non-visual. Vision, as the higher of the five senses, is the last program of the brain concept in the primary perceptual stage, and this narrative sequence is obviously more in line with objective facts.

The construction of brain texts is an important cause of the ethical tragedy of the twentieth century. Neither Mrs. Dalloway nor Septimus nor the royal family members who are high above them have escaped from the tragedy of being invented by the world. Mrs. Dalloway's anxiety is thought to stem from the impact of the flu on the heart. As for Septimus, it was thought that he was insane after experiencing the war--one of his best friends was dead in the war. As for whether the flu had an effect on the heart, whether the stimulus caused madness, there was lack of reasonable explanation from an objective pathological point of view. Krissa's life is shaped according to the brain texts of her parents, the Dalloways, and middle-class society as a whole. She was married to Richard of the Conservative Party and reserved her place as a middle class housewife getting involved in politics, buying her own flowers and holding varieties of parties. She was kind to the servants, and the servants liked her in turn. She kept saying thanks to them for making her who she is now, for making her "gentle and generous-hearted,

sentimental and civilized". She finally became the self who lived in someone else's brain text, but she could no longer deceive her own heart. She fell in love with Sally, another female, essentially because Sally bravely rejected the brain text expected by society. On her first impression, Sally sat on the floor, smoking a cigarette, plucked the flowers and put them on the water. Unverified brain texts were made up in order to rationalize power structures such as war and class division. Mrs. Dalloway loved walking in London rather than in the countryside "since her people were courtiers once in the time of the Georges".[5]9 She inherited the ethical identity of her ancestors as nobility and all the brain texts along with the inheritance of the bloodline. Peter ever called her the perfect hostess who had the makings of the perfect hostess. Krissa became Mrs. Dalloway, a middle-class housewife of aristocratic descent living in London, England, "who did things not simply, not for themselves, but to make people." She became gradually invisible, unseen and unknown.

In the real brain text, Mrs. Dalloway is tired of everything that seems beautiful. Instead, she thinks of herself that just survived in London while the real herself is "part of the trees at home, of the house there, ugly, rambling all to the bits and pieces as it was; part of people she had never met; being laid out like a mist between the people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist, but it spread ever so far, her life, herself." [5]5 And what she's been doing was to endure like the good men and women of the world. "The late age of the world's experience had bred in them all, all men and women, a well of tears. Tears and sorrows; Courage and endurance, a perfectly upright and social bearing." [5]9 Unlike other animals, humans have cognitive abilities, which also determines that people, unlike beasts, can eventually move towards ethical choices. Different brain texts determine different ethical choices. Literary ethics holds that human natural selection has chosen only human forms for human beings, and such biological selection does not distinguish humans from other animals, but only in the stage of ethical selection does human beings have the essence of being different from beasts.

#### 4. Ethical Identity and Ethical Selection

"Human cognition is a process from perception to thinking to text. Sensation and perception are combined to form perception, thereby enabling the perception, sensation, extraction, transmission, cognition, comprehension, and expression of external and internal information. Any cognition of man needs to be confirmed by consciousness before it exists." [4] From perception to thinking to text, every step in the cognitive process needs to be confirmed by consciousness to complete, and the stream of consciousness is connected into lines by tracking each moment of consciousness, connecting into surfaces, and finally forming a kaleidoscope of perspective on human thinking.

Literary ethics believes that human identity is a sign of a person's existence in society, and people need to bear the responsibilities and obligations entrusted by identity. Among them, the natural identity is determined by blood, distinguishing between man and beast, while the ethical identity is a social identity, distinguishing between people and people. Mrs. Dalloway, Peter, and Septimus all lived in ethical dilemmas, they seriously perceived, thought, and consciously perceived everything around them, and their knife-like cognition shaped their different brain texts, and also determined their different ethical selections and ultimate ethical identities. The ethical selection here is not the traditional one between good and evil, but decision made among many ethical identities. It is about a brain text that caters to the requirements of society but violates the ideal of the heart, or a brain text that refuses to meet the requirements of society and continues to practice its ideal brain text, or struggles between ideal and reality and finally chooses to give up practicing any brain text. Compared with Mrs. Dalloway, Septimus has lived through war and hardship, and although even Dr. Holmes said

that Septimus was not sick, he was still considered as an insane one with no ability to take care of himself. After the war, he became suspicious of the existing religion, constructed different religious brain texts in his own mind, and perhaps in the eyes of others, this was just another crazy pagan birth, and together with a tree and two sparrows, he founded the doctrine of this religion" Men must not cut down trees. There is a God. Change the world. No one kills from hatred. Make it known." This religion, which calls for the equality of all life, is destined to be nipped in the bud in a society full of hierarchical structures.

Needless to say, "The stream-of-consciousness novels tend to stand by the characters, because their inner world—whether they are vain, selfish, or lowly—can be exposed to the reader's eyes and resonates with the reader." [6] However, in other words, a character that doesn't resonate with us at all is unlikely to attract the author and the reader to be continuously immersed in the psychological portrayal of the character. This is highlighted by Mrs. Dalloway, as its heroine appeared as a supporting character in Woolf's first novel, *The Voyage*; Using a more traditional narrative style, *Voyage* portrays Clerissa Dalloway and her husband as the arrogant, conservative image of British high society in a tone that is not without irony and prejudice.

Stream-of-consciousness respects the brain text construction process of each character in the novel, and is a forward narrative of ethical choices, rather than a reverse narrative of inverse cause and effect. "Stream-of-consciousness novels tend to sympathize the characters because their inner world—whether they are vain, selfish, or lowly—is exposed to the reader and resonates with the reader. Whether it is Septimus, who chooses to commit suicide, Peter, who chooses to insist on herself, or Mrs. Dalloway, who chooses to go against her heart and inherit her worldly identity, all their ethical choices form a brain concept from the feeling of the outside world, construct a brain text, and finally make their own ethical choices, choose their own ethical identity, and each person's choice is natural, understandable, and sympathetic. Such an ethical position clearly helps the reader to recognize the plurality of living individuals, providing courage for individual brain texts to be built by themselves.

For Woolf, these atoms were far more than random or meaningless. Tens of millions of them constitute fragments of life, revealing important or insignificant glimpses of life fragments that are actually the essence of the novel. Therefore, Georgian novelists should try their best to describe the inner consciousness of individuals, grasp the fragments of life, emphasize dematerialization, and write casual, poetic, and free novels. The work of many important modernist writers such as Proust, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and many others has one thing in common, namely that they all use new ways of expressing the changing world, even if their specific techniques are different. "Beautiful Caves" are often thought of as containers for character memories, and her use of caves may be related to her stream-of-consciousness technique. It is worth noting that Woolf maintained respect for the literary past and traditions, including certain values and ideas of the past. Therefore, it can be said that on the basis of absorbing the essence of past literature, she has formed her own writing connotation and style.

## 5. Conclusion

Stream of consciousness brings a huge shock to realism and a great challenge to the traditional order. Since its birth, stream of consciousness has been seen as the rebellion of the overstatement of the material world. However, many works of stream of consciousness provide great opportunities for readers to reexamine the external factors not to totally escape from or give up the material world. In ethical literary criticism, brain text provides a better perspective to understand this paradox emphasizing the biological basis of literature. In *Mrs Dalloway*, the narrator described the "sea", "flower", "tree" and other objective indicators to trace the senses of main characters, which form their respective brain concepts and then construct their ethical identities as well as ethical selections. The characters including Mrs Dalloway, Peter and

Septimus all suffer a lot from the conflicts between the ideal brain texts and the real ones imposed on themselves. This course reveals the dramatic changes of western society after the First World War, in which people are caught in the sense of loneliness and alienation.

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