

Consciousness in Post-Modern Times. On Modes of Self-Reflection in Contemporary English Fiction

Nourhan A. Kassem

Abstract:

This Bright Inward Cinema of Thought: Stream of consciousness in Contemporary English Fiction by Sara Strauß offers representative cases for the state of the literature techniques used within contemporary English fiction. Divided into six sections, the book presents a panorama of the different narratological modes in the modern era. Beginning with an introduction that considers the theoretical framework, the author shows the development of those modes by reflecting upon aspects of consciousness, such as free indirect style and interior monologue. The book concludes by highlighting the modernist question about consciousness and its reflection on the post-modernism era.

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Text or discourse? These two units fight with each other to attract scholars on each side. Nevertheless, although the trend now is in favour of discourse-analysis, at least in social science, some still believe in text and that its contributions to analysis are not just an element of or component engulfed by the discourse. To this end, Sara Strauß presents her thesis beginning with an introduction where she situates its topic in its theoretical context by highlighting the mind-body problem. This philosophical concern has always been a topic with which many philosophers have been preoccupied. It was not until the twentieth century that the human psyche moved into the focus of attention as a result of Freud's and Jung's research. In addition to that, industrialization and modernization affected researchers of this era from different specializations greatly. Here, Strauß admits that literature studies and novelties were not an exception.

As an introduction to the main topic, Strauß begins by presenting the theoretical context of stream of consciousness, summoning the different techniques of novelty that had preceded it. Beginning with the definition of intermediality as "any transgression of boundaries between conventionally distinct media of communication" (p.15), she moves on to depict the controversies between this and similar techniques. She elucidates each technique, such as free indirect style, free direct style, stream of consciousness, and interior monologue, with its main features. Investigating the role of language in terms of grammar, tenses, and sentence structure, Strauß stages a comparison of all of them, and how each one was employed to reflect the consciousness affected by the social and political sphere. For example, she differentiates free indirect style from direct and indirect discourse by the absence of subordination, transition of pronouns, transition of verbs, shift in deictic adverbs – i.e. here, yesterday – signals of unreliable narration, and adoption of the character-focaliser's idiolect (40-2). Developing this idea in her introduction, she illustrates the twentieth century's different theories and modes of modern narratology: stream of consciousness and interior monologue. Although they may share some aspects with free indirect style, there are some other defining aspects, such as first-person reference of pronouns, temporal reference to the present, and influence on the style of language (49-50). Although she does not state her methodology clearly, she prefers

to let each narrative speak about itself, and watch the interaction of different techniques in each narrative.

In all selected cases, she begins with a short biography about the author, followed by a synopsis of the novel, and a discussion of modes of presenting consciousness, since most of her cases show an inclination towards modernism-related techniques. In Eva Figes' light, Ian McEwan's *Atonement* and *Saturday*, as well as Graham Swift's *Tomorrow*, Strauß elucidates the role of visual arts and how the authors used subjects such as water, light, and shades to depict stream of consciousness more as a river than a chain composed of separate rings. As no novel is placed in a vacuum, there should be a connection between authors and their previous works. Strauß emphasizes that all novels had been based on a sort of intertextuality and recurring motifs regarding the stream-of-consciousness literature. *Atonement* Strauß describes as "a book full of books" (115), due to the different allusions clear in this novel: Shakespeare, Fielding and Austen, all of whom were interested in reflecting the human mind (115-6).

Referring to the fact that these novels came as a reaction to the social, political, and cultural contexts in which they were written, Strauß cleverly underlines how all of them apply the stream of consciousness to the children and protagonists. As Strauß mentions: Figes emphasized "the innocence, impartiality and imaginative powers of children" (78). One can notice that in different parts of Figes's light, especially when the narrative pays attention to Jimmy's point of view and approaches the child's intrinsic mind: "He was beginning to feel hungry, having traveled on horse back for days" (78). Using free indirect style in *Atonement*, McEwan managed to give "an insight into the child's set of values and worries, which largely differ from the ones of adults" (p.121). A more extreme case, in *Saturday*, Baxter suffers from a mental disorder, which results from a neurodegenerative disease. Although McEwan has not offered Baxter's unmediated insights into his inner life, he presented different aspects of his state of mind: the physical causes of his disorder, their symptoms and how these affect his behavior, and the prospective progression of that disease (p.158).

Despite the fact that the reader of Strauß' thesis might be confused with her reading of modernism-related techniques being placed in the post-modern atmosphere, Strauß skillfully succeeds in recreating a kind of passion. Highlighting the role of religion in society and how modernism approached it, she refers to the bible as a work of literature instead of Holy Scripture, presenting intertextual relations within Swift's *Tomorrow* (p.180). Here, she alludes to religion and corresponding books as literature not sent from God, the absolute, which underlines her modernism and her primary premises. However, this might be justified when we know that Swift aimed at exposing the split in his protagonist's inner life, which swings between confession and procrastination (185).

Strauß eventually clears up the reader's confusion on the modernism-post-modernism controversy in the epilogue. However, she provokes more questions with her wrapping-up statement: "The novels analyzed in this thesis can therefore be considered as examples of a new period [of] a return to modernism with a difference [and] vengeance". Again, Strauß refused

to end peacefully when she addressed her selected novels as stones in the calm water. She said that they particularly aimed at transcending both modernism and post-modernism, but they conclude with an open end.

In sum, Strauß exerts diligent effort to depict the development of making a literary text compatible with the complicated life that came out of the 'industrialization womb'. Here one can say that text as a medium of delivery has certain capabilities. Over-textualizing will not lead to anything but burning the text with the energy it either contains or lacks, or what is called the stress explosion.