**Joyce’s Stream of Consciousness**

The term “stream of consciousness” is bandied about a fair bit. It isn’t very often that the persons using the term are actually familiar with the narrative technique. James Joyce pioneered the style in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* his first novel; in it he uses the stream of consciousness narrative mode to bring the reader psychologically closer to Stephen’s mind.

In the final pages of the book, in which the narrative viewpoint switches from a third-person to Stephen himself, Joyce uses the style to greatest effect. In that passage he gives the reader unfiltered access to Stephen’s mind, which is meaningful in that it shows us Stephen finally grown into his own man. The novel’s main focus is the development of Stephen from a boy to a young man. As such, having access to his mental processes is a perfect way to express this.

Stream of consciousness also allows for interesting use of montage throughout the novel; we are able to see Stephen connect different ideas together with mental leaps. Lastly, Joyce places heavy emphasis on moving the story forward through epiphany. On his journey from boy to artist, Stephen has numerous moments of enlightenment, and displaying Stephen’s raw mental experience during those moments is a powerful way to convey the potency of the epiphany and the growth of the character.

**The Coming of Age**

The Bildungsroman (also known as the coming of age story) is a genre that originates out of Germany. It is, simply put, a story that focuses on the psychological and/or philosophical growth of the main character from a position of youthful naiveté into maturity. Portrait of the Artist opens with the consciousness of a young boy, possibly a toddler, seen here:

*“When you wet the bed first it is warm then it gets cold. His mother put on the oilsheet. That had the queer smell. His mother had a nicer smell than his father. She played on the piano the sailor’s hornpipe for him to dance."*

Stephen’s mental wandering is developed right from the beginning, linking separate ideas and statements with certain sensations or from a reader’s standpoint: words. In the above case, Stephen moves from the temperature sensation to the sensation of smell. The sensation of smell then links his experience of the oilsheet with the experience of mother, and it goes on and on. At the end of the novel, we get to see through Stephen’s eyes as a young man using the exact same tactic:

*“Wild spring. Scudding clouds. O life! Dark stream of swirling bogwater on which apple-trees have cast down their delicate flowers. Eyes of girls among the leaves. Girls demure and romping. All fair or auburn: no dark ones. They blush better.”*

In this quotation it is clear that we are looking at Stephen’s thoughts, but his thoughts are more organized as well as poetic. Thusly, using this style to display the mentality of the character provides a subtle, yet great way to show gradual intellectual, moral, and psychological development in a Bildungsroman story.

**A Stream of Epiphany**

*Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* takes us through Stephen’s coming-of-age in an exceptional way by growing the character primarily using a series of epiphanies. These epiphanies are understood by the reader in a very intimate way because of the stream of consciousness. At the end of Chapter 4, where Stephen rejects his pious lifestyle, he has an epiphany upon witnessing a girl wading in the river.

*“A girl stood before him in midstream, alone and still, gazing out to sea. She seemed like one whom magic had changed into the likeness of a strange and beautiful seabird. Her long slender bare legs were delicate as a crane’s and pure save where an emerald trail of seaweed had fashioned itself as a sign upon the flesh.”*

In this quotation and in the entire scene, one can see a different kind of stream of consciousness. Instead of being characterized by mental leaps of association, one can feel Stephen’s captivation with the image of this woman, the beauty of her. His thoughts do not dwell upon the particular girl he sees, but instead take joy from merely seeing something that is beautiful. This leads him to the epiphanic decision “to live, to err, to fall, to triumph, to recreate life out of life.”

That decision guides him one step closer on his journey towards becoming an artist, and the reader’s exposure to his mental experience helps to provide a sense of the epiphany that propels him along his destiny.

**Literary Montage**

In the last pages of the novel, one feels that the story is being accelerated to its end along with Stephen being propelled into his destiny to free himself just as his namesake, Daedalus, did. Suddenly the narrative becomes quite clipped and contained within short snapshots of action.

Stephen’s journal entries are probably the culmination of the stream of consciousness in the novel, sidestepping the narrator and going right to Stephen. The resulting effect tells us that the story is complete. Stephen has finally found his own voice, and is secure in his person. It is during this final scene where Joyce utilizes montage in spectacular fashion, cutting between a series of short scenes summarizing Stephen’s experience of a day.

Montage is commonly used in films to connect two ideas to each other. Often, using a jump cut will be used to juxtapose two images. Other times, and what can be seen in the final pages of the book, the cuts in space and time are used to actually compress reading time, conveying that Stephen feels impatience and the lust to wander.

One can find associations in between his entries, similar to how there were associations between simple sensations at the beginning. At the end however, he draws more complicated associations, such as the consideration of the words he used in his poem on April 11, followed by his consideration of the word “tundish” and his previous experience with the English dean the 13th. The 14th finds him brooding on the Irish language versus the English language. The montage creates a stream of consciousness that associates these separate ideas together.

**The Power of Consciousness**

James Joyce is one of the most celebrated writers of all time, and a key aspect of his fame, success, and lasting power was his use of the stream of consciousness style. In *A Portrait* he puts us inside the mind of young boy, shows us his vulnerabilities, his strengths, his disillusionment, his empowerment, and his triumph. We get to understand Stephen Dedalus as nobody else could, growing with him as we read the novel, and that is the true power of the stream of consciousness: that we can all swim in it.

References:

Joyce, James. *A Portrait of the Artist As A Young Man*. ISBN 0-14-243734-4