

# The Stream of Consciousness in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*: A Study

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The technique of stream of consciousness is one of the crucial techniques of the Modernist movement. Virginia Woolf used it playfully, and we can find the examples in her mock biography *Orlando* as well. She used it for expressing *Orlando*'s feelings and moods in his/her inner dialogues.

Quite often the technique was also used as a commentary by the biographer. The novel is very interesting for the status of the biographer. The biographer is there as a narrator, but he/she also questions the objectivity of the biography. The narrator asks himself/herself whether it is possible to write and retell the life of someone else when there is some document missing and we have never been in the mind of the given person. The stream of consciousness expresses the opinions, observations, or doubts of the biographer.

As in the following quotation, this takes place after *Orlando*'s first trance. The narrator is thinking freely about what it actually was - long sleep, temporary death or something else.

“But if sleep it was, of what nature, we can scarcely refrain from asking, are such sleeps as these? Are we so made that we have to take death in small doses daily or we could not go on with the business of living? And then what strange powers are these that penetrate our most secret ways and change our most treasured possessions without our willing it? Had *Orlando*, worn out by the extremity of his suffering, died for a week, and then come to life again? And if so, of what nature is death and of what nature is life? Having waited well over half an hour for an answer to these questions, and none coming, let us get on with the story.” (*Orlando*, p. 40)

In the following section, we encounter the inner dialogue of *Orlando*. He was very sad that the Princess had left him, and he cannot prevent himself from thinking about it. He wanted to find out what had happened, why she had left him:

“Thus it was that *Orlando*, dipping his pen in the ink, saw the mocking face of the lost Princess and asked himself a million questions instantly which were as arrows dipped in gall. Where was she; any why had she left him? Was the Ambassador her uncle or her lover? Had they plotted? Was she forced? Was she married? Was she dead?”(O, p. 47)

When *Orlando* was in Turkey and fell into the trance, an uprising broke out. And this is the moment when the narrator-biographer considers what to do - he/she can end the story and spare us some time or he/she can tell the rest of the story. But some inner voice tells him/her that the truth needs to be said and it cannot be omitted:

“And now again obscurity descends, and would indeed that it were deeper! Would, we almost have it in our hearts to exclaim, that it were so deep that we could see nothing whatever through its opacity! Would that we might here take the pen and write Finis to our work! Would that we might spare the reader what is to come and say to him in so many words, *Orlando* died and was buried. But here,

alas, Truth, Candour, and Honesty, the austere Gods who keep watch and ward by the inkpot of the biographer, cry No! Putting their silver trumpets to their lips they demand in one blast, Truth! And again they cry Truth! and sounding yet a third time in concert they peal forth, The Truth and nothing but the Truth!” (O, p. 84)

Another crucial moment comes when *Orlando*, as a woman, is reaching the British isles. She thinks very closely of her new status and in her mind it causes quite turmoil. She understands very well what is expected from her as a female as she was once a man and knew exactly what he expected from women. At the same time she regrets things she cannot do once she gets to Britain. *Orlando* needs to cope with her new duties and accept her inferior status as compared to her previous status as a man and as an Ambassador:

““And that’s the last oath I shall ever be able to swear,’she thought;’once I set foot on English soil. And I shall never be able to crack a man over the head, or tell him he lies in his teeth, or draw my sword and run him through the body, or sit among my peers, or wear a coronet, or walk in procession, or sentence a man to death, or lead an army, or prance down Whitehall on a charger, or wear seventy-two different medals on my breast. All I can do, once I set foot on English soil, is to pour out tea and ask my lords how they like it. D’you take sugar? D’you takes cream?”” (O, p. 100)

The narrator did not consider only his/her thoughts but also the possible objections of other people on the nature of *Orlando*’s sex. *Orlando* was not a typical female or a male. She possessed some of the features of both sexes and the biographer tried to put it straight. But I do not think that it was really necessary, almost no one is a real typical representative of his/her sex. But the narrator tries to make the case clear:

“The curious of her own sex would argue, for example, if *Orlando* was a woman, how did she never take more than ten minutes to dress? And were not her clothes chosen rather at random, and sometimes worn rather shabby? And then they would say, still, she has none of the formality of a man, or a man’s love of power. She is excessively tender-hearted. She could not endure to see a donkey beaten or a kitten drowned. Yet again, they noted, she detested household matters, was up at dawn and out among the fields in summer before the sun had risen. No farmer knew more about the crops than she did. She could drink with the best and liked games of hazard. She rode well and drove six horses at a gallop over London Bridge.” (O, p. 121-122)

After the accident in London streets where the Archduke saved her life in front of the crowd, she had to think about her safety. When she was a man, she could go wherever she wanted and she also could fight for herself without any shame but now, as a woman she could not do it. She was dependent on favours of other men who would defend her and her honour:

“What with the crowd, what with the Duke, what with the jewel, she drove home in the vilest temper imaginable. Was it impossible then to go for a walk without being half-suffocated, presented with a toad set in emeralds, and asked in marriage by an Archduke?” (O, p. 123)

As I showed above, the technique of stream of consciousness is a perfect method of showing the inner feelings of the characters. Otherwise, it is very difficult to say exactly what the protagonists are feeling or what they are thinking about at the given moment. I believe that it is quite essential to know the motivation for our understanding of the characters and we can also identify with them easier and justify their behaviour.

**Reference:**

Woolf, Virginia., *Orlando*. A Biography. London: The Random House Group Limited, 2004.

