

Consciousness on Stream in *The Ambassadors* by Henry James

Liliana COLODEEVA*

Abstract

The purpose of the current paper is to analyse, in parallel, the works of two American brothers, William and Henry James, who influenced the psychological and literary standards of the twentieth century. William theorised the concept of consciousness and coined the term "stream of consciousness"; Henry pictured it in his novels by imitating the stream of consciousness of his characters. The wide variety of Thematic Progression and lexical repetition throughout the latter's novel, The Ambassadors, is accompanied by numerous literary devices which attempt to reconstruct the movements of thought and the psychological processes related to it. In this regard, the paper aims to analyse Henry James's skilful use of the Theme and Rheme pattern in The Ambassadors, which seems intended to increase the complexity of the narrative thread, as well as the lexical repetition present throughout the novel, accompanied by numerous literary devices which, in turn, attempt to reconstruct the movements of thought and the psychological processes related to it.

Key words: *thought, stream of consciousness, introspection, thematic progression, lexical repetition*

Although Henry James does not constantly use the stream of consciousness technique, his novels foreground the mind of his characters. This paper attempts to analyse the representation of the *stream of consciousness* in the novel *The Ambassadors*, which is considered a masterpiece of James's psychological novels.

The Ambassadors narrates the story of an American gentleman who travels to Europe. Throughout this travel he rediscovers himself. Lambert Strether, an ordinary man in America, when placed in a different environment and thrown into a non-standard situation, evidently begins to think and act differently. The same as William James, known as the first

* Senior Lecturer, "B. P. Haşdeu" Cahul State University,
Republic of Moldova, colodeeva.liliana@usch.md

psychologist to found a psychological laboratory in America to study the origins of human behaviour, Henry James attempts to examine his character's mind by testing him on various life situations and observing his psychological unfolding. As James states in the preface to the novel with reference to Lambert Strether:

He had come with a view that might have been figured by a clear green liquid, say, in a neat glass phial; and the liquid, once poured into the open cup of *application*, once exposed to the action of another air, had begun to turn from green to red, or whatever, and might, for all he knew, be on its way to purple, to black, to yellow. At the still wilder extremes represented perhaps, for all he could say to the contrary, by a variability so violent, he would at first, naturally, but have gazed in surprise and alarm; whereby the *situation* clearly would spring from the play of wildness and the development of extremes (1998: xxxvi).

The major character seems to be trapped in Henry James's laboratory of fiction, where he is eager to see what comes out of this experiment. James admits that he wants to question the "little old tradition [...] that people's moral scheme *does* break down in Paris; [...] that hundreds of thousands of more or less hypocritical or more or less cynical persons annually visit the place for the sake of the probable catastrophe" (James 1998: xxxvii). Apparently, he plans to watch "the revolution performed by Strether under the influence of the most interesting of great cities" and present everything through immersion in the world of the hero's consciousness (1998: xxxviii). Julie Wolkenstein writes that France lived in James's heart and in his novels, "England reassured him, Italy seduced him, but French history and habits remained unfamiliar to him" (Zacharias 2008: 417). It is, though, the country where he sends his 'ambassador' to scoop for knowledge.

Lambert Strether, a resident of the American town of Woollett, arrives in Paris to fulfil one specific assignment: he must bring home Chad, the son of a very well-known lady in Woollett. His mother, Mrs. Newsome, is waiting her son to take an excellent place in the family business and multiply their incomes. Lambert Strether, in turn, is also promised a reward - Mrs. Newsome's hand and heart. Thus, Strether comes to Paris. He expects to find Chad mired in vicious pleasures and captivated by some Parisian charmer. Surprisingly, he finds the idle and frivolous Chad Newsome completely transformed. The new Chad has manners, attitude and the talent to please people. Strether quickly realizes that behind these changes stands a woman. On the one hand, Lambert Strether faces a

dilemma: whether to bring Chad home or to let him live his own life. On the other hand, Paris captures Strether's heart too, so that Woollett somewhat loses its attractiveness and he himself does not want to return home. Strether experiences new acquaintances and new impressions. He seems to re-experience his youth and bathes in the waves of new feelings and emotions. James's loyalty to the chosen subjective perspective of narration permits the reader to follow all the transformations of Strether's consciousness.

Thus, to mirror the human mind, the narration has to consist of emotions, impressions and associations, which in *The Ambassadors* are the thoughts and feelings of the major character, Strether; he becomes the 'centre of consciousness' of the novel. In this case, it would be reasonable to use the first person narration, but Henry James states, in the preface to *The Ambassadors*, that this type of narration is "foredoomed to looseness" (1998: xli) and that he does not want to grant his hero the "double privilege of subject and object" (1998: xlii). James suggests that the introduction of one or two confidant characters would diminish "the discrimination" of the method and help the reader better understand the major character (1998: xliii). Therefore, in *The Ambassadors*, James uses a third person narration with a limited, subjective, shifting point of view, rarely intertwined with instances of dialogue. The novel is narrated from Strether's perspective, with the help of a *ficelle* character, Maria Gostrey. The *ficelle* or confidant character is extremely needed for the reader, indeed, as the plot of the novel is very complex and elaborate and there is nobody and nothing else to assist the comprehension of the plot. James contributes to the development of the stream of consciousness effect by using long, grammatically and lexically complex sentences to render Strether's thoughts, impressions, feelings and plans. This makes the reading of the novel very difficult because it demands undivided attention.

Due to the fact that (according to W. James) thoughts need words to form meaning, it is reasonable that linguistics or semantics be considered in analysing a narrative text written in the *stream of consciousness* style. The concept of the Theme-Rheme structure was introduced by Michael Halliday in *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, 1985. He states that the coherence of a text is developed by means of specific thematic organisation, where Theme is "the point of departure of the message" which directs "the clause within its context" (2004: 64), and Rheme is the part which provides information about the Theme (2004: 65). Recently, seven types of possible Thematic Progression within a text have been advanced: *Parallel* or *Constant*

Theme Progression, Zigzag or Linear Progression, Derived Theme Progression, Multiple-Rheme or Split-Rheme Progression, Crisscross Progression, Juxtaposition Thematic Progression and Centralised Progression (Bloor 2004: 88-93; Eggins 2004: 325; Wang 2006: 9).

The following passage is an example of a skilful use of the Theme and Rheme pattern which seems intended to increase the complexity of the narrative line. In this single passage, one can trace the Thematic Progression (represented by the formulae) and the lexical repetition (represented by the words written in bold) which mirror the progression of thought:

Two days later **he** T1 had **news** from Chad of a **communication** from **Woollett** in response to their determinant **telegram** R1, this **missive** T2R1 being **addressed** to Chad himself and announcing the immediate **departure** for France of **Sarah** and Jim and Mamie R2. **Strether** T3T1 had meanwhile on his own side **cabled** R3; **he** T4T1 had but delayed that **act** till after his **visit** to Miss Gostrey R4R3, an **interview** T5R4 by which, as so often before, **he** felt his sense of things cleared up and settled R5. **His message to Mrs. Newsome** T6R3, in **answer** to her own, had consisted of the **words**: 'Judge best to take another month, but with full appreciation of all re-enforcements.' R6 **He** T7T1 had added R7 that **he** T8T1 was **writing** R8, but **he** T9T1 was of course **always writing** R9R8; **it** T10R8 was a practice that **continued**, oddly enough, to relieve **him**, to make **him** come nearer than anything else to the consciousness of doing something R10: so that **he** T11T1 often wondered if he hadn't really, under his recent stress, acquired some hollow trick, one of the specious **arts of make-believe** R11. Wouldn't the **pages he** T12T1 still so freely dispatched by the **American post** have been worthy of a showy **journalist**, some master of the great new science of beating the **sense** out of **words**? R12R11 Wasn't **he** T13T1 **writing** against time, and mainly to show he was kind? R13R8 – since **it** T14R8 had become quite his habit not to like to read himself over R14. On **those lines he** T15T1 could still be liberal R15, yet **it** T16R8 was at best a sort of **whistling** in the **dark** R16. **It** T17R8 was unmistakable moreover that the **sense** of being in the **dark** now pressed on him more sharply – creating thereby the need for a louder and livelier **whistle** R17R16. **He** T18T1 **whistled** long and hard after sending his **message** R18R16; **he** T19T1 **whistled** again and again in celebration of Chad's **news** R19R16; there was an interval of a fortnight in which this **exercise** T20R18 helped him R20 (James 1998: 237).

The alternation of Parallel / Constant and Linear / Zigzag Progressions prove Strether's continuity and progression of the stream of thought. From

the idea of the telegram received by Chad from Woollett to his own telegrams sent to America, his thought spreads to other family members of the Newsomes by means of associations in his consciousness. However, the fact that there are much more instances of Constant Thematic Pattern explains James's attempt to ensure the representation of selective attention. As W. James puts it: "[t]he mind selects [and] chooses certain of the situations to represent the thing most *truly*, and considers the rest as its appearances, modified by the conditions of the moment" (2006: 287). In the same manner, Strether's thoughts go back and forth in past and present being influenced by the sensations and the circumstances of the present moment, but still sticking to his concern about his present relation with the Newsome family. The lexical repetition adds to the effect of textual unity and continuity of thought. The related words which form the lexical repetition are revolving around the idea of writing letters and telegrams. It is Strether's constant sub-conscious object of thought throughout this passage.

The wide variety of Thematic Progression and lexical repetition throughout the novel is accompanied by numerous literary devices which attempt to reconstruct the movements of thought and the psychological processes related to it. The detached and parenthetical constructions help to include additional information to the present stream of thought, or sometimes signal the shift between the points of view. Anadiplosis and anaphora seem to aid the representation of thought continuity and concentration of attention. The parallel construction seems to support the flow and unity of the stream of consciousness while represented in written form. Asyndeton points to the abruptness in the stream of thought and transition to another one, while polysyndeton, on the contrary, to the flow and continuity of thought. A possible list is presented below:

- *detached construction*: "was exactly the kind of emotion - the emotion of bewilderment - that had proposed to himself from the first, whatever should occur, to show least" (James 1998: 96);
- *parallel construction*: "he waited for his fish, he drank of his wine, he wiped his long moustache, he leaned back in his chair, he took in the two English ladies" (1998: 71); "there had been simply a *lie* in the charming affair - a lie on which one could now, detached and deliberate, perfectly put one's finger. It was with the lie that they had eaten and drunk and talked and laughed, that they had waited for their *carriole* rather impatiently, and had then got into the vehicle and, sensibly subsiding, driven their three or four miles through the darkening summer night" (1998: 393).

- *parenthetical construction*: “than the ‘terrible toughs’ (Strether remembered the edifying discrimination) of the American bars and banks roundabout the Opera” (1998: 64);
- *anadiplosis*: “he was very young; young enough apparently to be amused at an elderly watcher” (1998: 69); “Strether had never smoked, and he felt as if he flaunted at his friend that this had been only for a reason. The reason [...] that he had never had a lady to smoke with” (1998: 81);
- *anaphora*: “was exactly society, exactly the multiplication of shibboleths, exactly the discrimination of types and tones, exactly the wicked old Rows of Chester, rank with feudalism; exactly in short Europe” (1998: 28); “the sky was silver and turquoise and varnish; the village on the left was white and the church on the right was grey; it was all there, in short – it was what he wanted: it was Tremont Street, it was France, it was Lambinet” (1998: 381);
- *asyndeton*: “Strether’s present highest flights were perhaps those in which this particular lapse figured to him as a symbol, a symbol of his long grind and his want of odd moments, his want moreover of money, of opportunity, of positive dignity. [...] His conscience had been amusing itself for the forty-eight hours by forbidding him the purchase of a book; he held off from that, held off from everything; from the moment he didn’t yet call on Chad he wouldn’t for the world have taken any other step” (1998: 61);
- *polysyndeton*: “It consisted of little more than a platform, slightly raised, with a couple of benches and a table, a protecting rail and a projecting roof; but it raked the full grey-blue stream, which, taking a turn a short distance above, passed out of sight to reappear much higher up; and it was clearly in esteemed requisition for Sundays and other feasts” (1998: 387-388).

The multifariousness of stylistic devices that shape the structure of the clauses makes the narration of the novel to resemble the real stream of consciousness, where all the associated thoughts and ideas interconnect and overlap one another.

Moreover, the subtle gliding from one thought to another, or from the character’s perspective to the narrator’s seldom ironic or thorny observations reveals James’s employment of the free indirect discourse, the fact which does not help the comprehensive reading but rather aggravate it by making it ambiguous and complex.

The most important devices used by Henry James in *The Ambassadors* to mirror the working of human consciousness seem to be Thematic Patterning and lexical cohesion. The instances of parallelism, detached construction, anadiplosis and anaphora have facilitated the

representation of the concentration of thoughts and processes of selective attention, just as it occurs inside the human mind. Besides, the frequent use of polysyndeton ensures the progression of thought and the creation of textual unity in the novel.

As in William James's theory, the stream of consciousness represented in the Jamesian novel is characterised by a continuous and changing aspect, but which is in constant progression. The use of complex and elaborate sentences demonstrates the character's collision of ideas, fleeting of thoughts, and richness of emotions; besides, they also point to the selective attention of the mind. The results of the stream of consciousness analysis in Henry James's novels indicate that, like his brother, William, he believed that consciousness never stops; on the contrary, its thoughts are like the atoms in a current of air which move continuously and one cannot say that they ended. 'The atoms' appear to be simply redirected in the stream of consciousness to other ideas, memories and objects of thought. Furthermore, the findings of this study suggest that James deliberately places his character in a new and unusual environment for him in order to examine his character's inner change and progression of thoughts, behaviour and ability to make decisions. This allows the reader to feel the state of the consciousness of the hero, to experience the situation through his perspective and to empathise with him.

James's novel, *The Ambassadors*, exemplifies many instances of mental states like reflection, pondering, planning, thinking or the simple condition of distraction. The main character, Lambert Strether, is shown from within, as he thinks and deliberates on the constantly difficult choices he has to make. Most importantly, one can clearly follow how James portrays the origination of thoughts in his characters' minds, which makes the reading of the novel fascinating and thought-provoking. Finally, the open ending and the incompleteness of James's novel are true evidence of the stream of consciousness representation. The constant afterthoughts and doubts which come along with the reading of James's novels represent the same 'figure in the carpet' that the narrator is confronted with in the homonymous short story.

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