Mrs. Dalloway Woolf’s Use of Stream of Consciousness Example

Mrs. Dalloway is a novel written in 1925 by Virginia Woolf. The story is told principally through the characters' thoughts and close interplay. What is brilliant about how Woolf tells the story is how she uses characters' thoughts, feelings, and reactions with continued associative and disassociative bounds, without the use of objective characterization or traditional dialogue. This technique allows readers to feel as if they are snooping on the characters and their thoughts. This is accomplished due to the fact that the streams are associated with emotional recollection, a sound, a visual image, or even a memory. This analysis will examine Woolf's prolonged use of 'stream of consciousness' through the characters thoughts and interactions throughout the narrative, and where the use of the technique is most prominent.

One important aspect to note about Woolf’s use of stream of consciousness is how the interior speeches serve as narrative and expository ploys. In the context of the story, the streams of consciousness convey information to
the reader. For example, in one particular moment, the reader is able to reminisce with Peter Walsh of years ago, when lead character Clarissa Dalloway did not return the love he had for her:

Of course I did, thought Peter; it almost broke my heart too, he thought; and was overcome with his own grief, which rose like a moon looked at from a terrace, ghastly beautiful with light from the sunken day. I was more unhappy than I've ever been since, he thought. And as if in truth he were sitting there on the terrace he edged a little towards Clarissa; put his hand out; raised it; let it fall. There above them it hung, that moon. She too seemed to be sitting with him on the terrace, in the moonlight. (Woolf 21)

Here, through this stream of Peter's consciousness, the reader is able to comprehend that Peter may still be hurting from his initial rejection by Clarissa. We can take from this anecdote that Peter may have some desire to reconcile with Clarissa and try to win her heart, even if he doesn't know it himself yet. This is on top of the fact that Peter is already married to someone else, though Peter is intent on divorcing her, as indicated by his reason to be in London. Another example of when a stream of consciousness is used to provide information to the reader is at the beginning of the novel, where we are first introduced to Clarissa Dalloway:

She had a perpetual sense, as she watched the taxi cabs, of being out, out, far out to sea and alone; she always had the feeling that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day. Not that she thought herself clever, or much out of the ordinary. How she had got through life on the few twigs of knowledge Fraulein Daniels gave them she could not think. She knew nothing; no language, no history; she scarcely read a book now, except memoirs in bed; and yet to her it was absolutely absorbing; all this; the cabs passing; and she would not say of Peter, she would not say of herself, I am this, I am that. (Woolf 4)

In one stretch, we see Clarissa draw attention to cabs before moving onto to her earlier days as a kid, then we return to the taxis driving by before she suddenly reminisces about Peter. The reader receives a lot of information in such a short period of time, all told through thoughts forming in and out of Clarissa's own mind. This moment also shows the aforementioned associative bounds used to formulate the interior monologue. This method overall allows the reader to learn some key information about Peter and Clarissa, getting to know who they are
and who they were by utilizing a unique style.

One cannot discuss Woolf's use of streams of consciousness without talking about the effect of switching back and forth between thoughts and the outer world. In the case of the novel, the effect is that the use of the method provides for a more authentic depiction of the characters. Woolf's goal was to illustrate the usually shrouded thoughts forming in a character's heads, which allowed for a far more empirical relationship between the characters and the reader. So, using that as context, when the reader learns of something tragic in a character's past and how they reacted to it, the reader is able to get a sense of how the character truly felt. A good example of such a moment is when Clarissa remembers the death of her sister:

Those ruffians, the Gods, shan't have it all their own way,? her notion being that the Gods, who never lost a chance of hurting, thwarting and spoiling human lives were seriously put out if, all the same, you behaved like a lady. That phase came directly after Sylvia's death? that horrible affair. To see your own sister killed by a falling tree (all Justin Parry's fault? all his carelessness) before your very eyes, a girl too on the verge of life, the most gifted of them, Clarissa always said, was enough to turn one bitter. (Woolf 39)

Here, we learn the circumstances of her sister's death and how she reacted to it. In short, Clarissa chiefly remained detached, continuing her polite and respectable behavior despite the tragedy. However, the reader is able to just as detached regarding the event as Clarissa due to how Woolf writes her character with the use of her inner thoughts. The reader is able to understand that this tragic moment in Clarissa's life was still not enough to make her a resentful woman, always remaining how she always has been. Furthermore, internal and personal moments like the few anecdotes discussed so far reveal the most alluring aspect of this method of storytelling, which is the potential disarray that could come out of such uses of the literary device. However, through clever repetitions like the constant mentioning of the ringing bell of the Big Ben throughout the novel, which indicates the story's events unfolding within the span of one day, fused with the internal happenings of the characters, Woolf successfully bypasses any chance of confusion from the reader, leading to a story that remains cohesive. The language and responses by the characters in these moments are coupled through the various cliques with a
sense of poignancy. Furthermore, the characters of the novel actually ponder, allowing the story and events to become more palpable. Through the utilization of stream of consciousness, the reader is allowed to take a deep dive into the characters' lives, reveal their occasional lunacy, and also reveal their conflict and ramifications.

The main idea of Mrs. Dalloway seems to be the expression of thoughts versus impressions. The use of streams of consciousness perfectly encapsulates that idea in the novel. The reader witnesses our characters having moments of inner monologues and open conversations with others, sharing information and personal feelings about various subjects. This allows for the idea to be highlighted by Woolf to the reader as we jump from streams of consciousness that contain associative/disassociative leaps to the exchanging of dialogue. The idea is illustrated in various moments in the story, particularly when the reader sees the struggle in Rezia with her husband Septimus, a war veteran with PTSD. To Rezia, Septimus was so dead and emotionless that he "made everything terrible; sky and tree, children playing, dragging carts, blowing whistles, falling down" (Woolf 11). This moment displays Rezia inner thoughts and feelings. The novel then briefly jumps to what Rezia tells her mother for an explanation in regards to the situation, "Septimus has been working too hard" (Woolf 11). It is clear that Rezia feels as she cannot talk to anyone, not even her mother, about her struggles as she watches Septimus remain blank. This moment perfectly spotlights the theme of the expression versus the impression of thoughts, characterizing the theme through Rezia and her personal struggle with Septimus.

Analyzing Virginia Woolf's use of streams of consciousness helps to provide a deep understanding of her purpose and intents as a writer. We are able to come to understand that Woolf strives to allow her readers to truly understand and know her characters on a much more personal level, by truly making the characters more real. The idea can easily raise questions in regards to the implementation and the chance of achievement of using such a method. In regards to Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf is successful in her execution of the idea, allowing the reader to delve deep into the characters of Clarissa, Peter, Septimus, Rezia, and other key characters of the novel. The reader is able to witness the ordinary conversations between the characters in their interactions with one another while also being able to essentially eavesdrop on what the characters are truly thinking and how they really feel. All in all, what this truly accomplishes for Woolf is a truly captivating and engaging day in the lives of a handful of
people living in London on a Wednesday in June 1923.