

## Stream of Sensitivity in James Joyce's

### A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.

There are many techniques and devices used in modern literature such as the interior monologue, uncle Charlie's principle, and so on and so forth. However, a special aspect of many modern works, and especially of A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, has been forgotten by critics. As it is already known, this novel is innovative because of the use its author makes of language, and many critics have considered that Joyce is just an exponent of stream of consciousness although, when read, this novel evokes something more profound. And yet, a special study on the relevance of perceptions in this novel is required to realise that the work has something different from others. So analysing the work many questions may appear concerning the validity of stream of consciousness as the only technique used by the author in order to make the work a perfectly organised catalogue of emotions. However, it is not difficult to realize that stream of consciousness is not enough when classifying Joyce's work as a unique piece of art since this technique was normally used by many modernist writers, and yet, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man remains an incomparable work. Therefore, a new concept will be necessary in order to understand the special nature of this work; a concept which will be referred to as "Stream of sensitivity": the device which makes this work a unique one. This Stream of sensitivity should be described as a term which denotes the mixture of different perceptions of reality through the five senses. As a matter of fact, even though the five senses are essential in the whole work from the very beginning, many have forgotten to say that the five senses, which form our Stream of sensitivity, are the main factor which makes A Portrait a singular novel. So it must be said that the existence of this technique should have appeared before, since the radical importance and difference of A Portrait is due to it.

The well-known stream of consciousness is "a term coined to denote the flow of inner experiences. It refers to that technique which seeks to depict the multitudinous thoughts and feelings which pass through the mind" (Cuddon, 1980:919). But on the other hand this flow of inner experiences is taken to an extreme by Joyce since he does not only describe Stephen's environment through his thoughts or by presenting his view about it, but above all through Stephen's senses.

– 2.

Descriptions, comparisons, and the way of perceiving Stephen's surroundings in Joyce's work are determined by what Stephen experiences. In this way the development of Stephen from a child to an adult may also be reflected by the growth of his perceptive organs, and indeed it must be seen as a closure of his senses which in adulthood are already formed. Thus, when Stephen was a child he could feel everything more accurately as a sign that his mind was open, was looking for information and facts, but as he grows older these senses are not so accurate. He no longer has that former hunger for knowing, for getting information from everywhere since he has already developed his own theories. This can be observed in the frequency with which Stephen experiences reality through his five senses, as, for instance, in the very first page of the work in which, as will be seen later on, all of them are present.

This new concept has at first sight little differences from the well-known stream of consciousness, but it is clearly evident that in order to create mental associations, an environment and a way of perceiving such an environment are necessary. So three well distinguished parts can be observed in the exposition of facts in the novel: Stephen's surroundings, that is, the external world from which he tries to get as much information as he can, his senses as the medium of grasping his environment, and mental processes of relations once those perceptions are assimilated in his mind. Indeed, if this description works well enough, as a rule, stream of consciousness will appear whenever he perceives something in an accurate way and in fact, this occurs this way, as it will be demonstrated. Nevertheless, in some cases Stephen feels an emotion but stream of

consciousness does not appear, and yet this must be due to a lack of earlier perceptions with which to associate these new ones. But it seems better to express this theory in practice, portraying this way that this new concept has not only a right to exist but that indeed it does exist and therefore it must be considered as important as the stream of consciousness theory.

Clear differences between Stream of sensitivity and stream of consciousness are also found from the very beginning, as for instance when Stephen talks about playing sums. Stream of sensitivity could be seen when he says: "White roses and red roses: those were beautiful colours to think of. And the cards for first place and second place and third place were beautiful colours too: pink and cream and lavender"(13). Here Stephen's sense of sight determines his perception and thus the most important fact from his point of view was not roses nor cards but colours. He could have described the roses and the cards in other ways as referring to their smell, size, or even to their tactile components, but however, this time his sense of sight determined the perception of the external objects.

– 3.

But it is exactly at this moment when he begins relating the perceptions he has just got to others he had perceived before. So now stream of consciousness appears: "Perhaps a wild rose might be like those colours. Thus he mixes the colours of roses and cards in a mental process of association, but it is in the following sentence that he makes more deep relations between his emotions and, as a matter of fact, the verb "remember" is used to indicate that he is going to think of something that comes from the past: " and he remembered the song about the wild rose blossom on the little green place. But you could not have a green rose"(13). However, there is a clear difference between both "streams" and this dissimilarity is even emphasized by the verbs used whenever Stephen is going to mix facts in his mind. These verbs are "remember" and "wonder" or expressions as "this brought to him...", but it is also through the use of potential verbal forms that he indicates the possibility of the relation, and always with a preceding emotion captured through his senses: "There was clod sunlight outside the window. He wondered if he would die. You could die just the same on a sunny day. He might die before his mother came. Then he could have a dead mass ..." (26).

As it has already been pointed out, all of Stephen's senses appear right at the beginning of the work, in the very first page, showing the relevance they are going to have in the whole novel. He presents his sense of sight by saying "his father looked at him through a glass"(7) and his sense of hearing follows immediately when he mentions a song: "He sang that song"(7); At this point his sense of touch takes place as when he talks about beds: "When you wet the bed first it is warm then it gets cold"(7); and his sense of smelling is presented by referring to his mother's nice smell: "His mother had a nicer smell"(7); Finally, he refers to his sense of taste when he says: "Dante gave him a cachou"(7).

So as can be seen, it is easy to find emotions perceived through his five senses right at the very beginning of the work as a contrast to the end where the presence of this Stream of sensitivity seems to diminish. However, it will be through Stephen's maturity that this technique will show Stephen's impressions, ways of relating facts, and above all, his development as an artist.

It seems that Stephen's perceptions, and consequently, Stephen's senses are related to his growth, that is to say, when he is a boy he is anxious for knowledge and that may be a reason why his senses are essential when the author talks about the protagonist as a young man. Nevertheless, as he grows up, he learns many things thanks to his senses and to his capacity of remembering them and relating them and therefore, at the end of the novel, when he has already reached maturity, he does no longer need to pay attention to his surroundings since he already knows a lot about it. Yet, as a boy his senses are crucial to determine and classify what he understand by the real world.

– 4.

Stephen's sense of hearing is one of the most essential features in the process of perception, although he suffers many tortures because of it. So it is possible to observe how Stephen associates loud sounds with tension and pain, while soft sounds produce in him a nice and comfortable reaction. From here it could be deduced that Stephen's sense of hearing is really delicate and sensitive, and in fact this can be seen at the very beginning when Stephen remembers the day he was playing with his companions: "All were shouting and the prefects urged them on with strong cries"(8). Later on he will talk about the sound of the word "suck" which was "an ugly sound" and he compares this sound with the sound of the lavatory when the water went through the hole, and he says that it was the same but "only louder"(12). So again ugliness is associated with loud sounds as it is also associated with anger and pain. Furthermore, the comparison Stephen makes right after this exposition of disturbing sounds between "the greasy leather orb" and "a heavy bird" is just the association produced by the stream of consciousness technique used by the author at this point, perfectly demonstrating that a relation must come after an impression, that is, that stream of consciousness appears after our stream of sensitivity. After this, it is easy to observe Stephen's dislike for strong sounds one more time, confirming this way the exclusive sensitivity of his sense of hearing when he says that his mother "was a nice mother but she was not so nice when she cried"(9).

It is after these perceptions through his sense of hearing that Stephen begins to experiment with his sense of touch, as for instance when he says "it was nice and warm to see the lights in the castle"(10). Thus he makes a connection between two of his senses: the sense of sight and the sense of touch (and if not touch literally, at least the warm he felt in his body). Later on, when talking about his fall into the water, Stephen says: "How cold and slimy the water had been!"(11), and he is attracted by his mother's slippers because they "were so hot and they had such a lovely warm smell"(11).

Up to this point there are certain aspects to take into account. First of all, it is important to put emphasis on the security Stephen feels when he is with his mother since he makes a contrast, using his sense of touch, between cold water, referring to a time when he felt insecure among his companions who were always stronger than him, and hot slippers with a lovely warm smell" to emphasize the fact that when he is with his mother he feels comfortable. Furthermore, there is a clear identification on the one hand of coolness with stillness and on the other hand of heat with eagerness, when Stephen says that his " silk badge fluttered and fluttered as he worked at the next sum and

– 5.

heard Father Aral's voice"(13) which, let it be said in passing, also makes Stephen completely angry: "Then all his eagerness passed away and he felt his face quite cool".

Right after talking about the game, Stephen is ready to experience new emotions and then to relate them to others, that is, Stream of sensitivity is followed immediately by stream of consciousness: "The table cloth was damp and limp. But he drank off the hot weak tea which the clumsy scullion, girt with a white apron, poured into his cup. He wondered whether the scullion's apron was damp too or whether all white things were cold and damp"(13).

In this passage full of emotions three of his senses are at stake: his sense of touch: " The table cloth was damp"(13), his sense of taste: "he drank off the hot weak tea"(13), and his sense of sight "The clumsy scullion, girt with a white apron"(13). These three sources of information are responsible for Stephen relating facts. However, after a few lines, a paragraph will be expressly dedicated to his sense of hearing:

He leaned his elbows on the table and shut and opened the flaps of his ears. Then he heard  
the noise of the refectory every time he opened the flaps of his ears. It made a roar like a train  
at night. And when he closed the flaps the roar was shut off like a train going into a tunnel.

(14)

And just at this point, stream of consciousness will appear one more time following our Stream of sensitivity: "That time at Dalkey, the train had roared like that"(14). Nevertheless, Stream of sensitivity does not only serve to pave the way for stream of consciousness but also to describe how Stephen feels, that is, to describe how an impression can make him not only relate things but also change his state, like for instance when Stephen is asked if he kissed his mother or not and he did not know the right answer: "He felt his whole body hot and confused in a moment" (15).

Wells was the one who asked him that question, and Wells had also been the one who had shouldered Stephen into a ditch. So talking about the fall into the water, the same device may be seen: " And how cold and slimy the water had been! And a fellow had once seen a big rat jump plop into the scum"(15).

Two facts are to be pointed out here: first of all, there is a comparison between a rat and how he had felt, so in one sense this perception is the same as the former one, that is, he had been confused because of the heat he had felt, and now he had felt like a rat because of the coldness of

– 6.

the water. But it is also important to mention the process of relation Stephen makes since again his senses, through our Stream of sensitivity, gives him an emotion, this time one of coldness through his sense of touch, and from it, Stephen relates this to something he had been told before: that "a boy had seen a rat jump into the scum".

Moreover, it is also about kissing his mother that Stephen gives his definition of kissing, a definition which merely follows his sense of touch and hearing: a feeling in his cheek and a little noise. His particular vision of a kiss is described this way; "His mother put her lips on his cheek; and they made a tiny little noise: kiss"(16).

There is one important passage in which it is possible to contemplate to what point his senses were important in his state. A clear identification between heat together with noises and excitement, anger and pain may be found:

There was a noise of curtain rings running back along the rods, of water being splashed in the basins. There was a noise of rising and dressing and washing in the dormitory: a noise of clapping of hands as the prefect went up and down telling the fellows to look sharp. (23)

Thus he establishes a connection between all these unpleasant emotions, that is, heat and noises with the fact that he was sick.

Among all the functions already mentioned of our Stream of sensitivity it is also possible to attribute to it the function of showing Stephen's desires and Stephen's state of mind like when Stephen is anxious about going to bed because of his tiredness: "it should be lovely in bed after the sheets got a bit hot. First they were so cold to get into. He shivered to think how cold they were first. But then they got hot and then he could sleep. It was lovely to be tired"(18–19).

It is also through his senses that Stephen describes certain places like the chapel, this time with his sense of smell: "There was a cold night smell in the chapel. But it was a holy smell. It was not like the smell of the old peasants who knelt at the back of the chapel at Sunday mass. That was a smell of air and rain and turf and corduroy" (19). Moreover, it is through his senses that he describes people, as when he refers to the marshal and his servants: "O how cold and strange it was to think of that! All the dark was cold and strange. There

were pale strange faces there, great eyes like carriagelamps"(21)

However, it must be admitted that the main function of Stream of sensitivity is to work up to the appearance of stream of consciousness since when talking about Stream of sensitivity we are talking about a central point in a process of assimilation. Clear examples are found when

– 7.

Stephen is sick and the feelings he experiences enable him to relate facts even when he is not very conscious because of his sickness: "As he passed the door he remembered with a vague fear the warm turf–coloured bog water, the warm moist air, the noise of plunges, the smell of towels, like medicine" (25).

When Stephen is sitting in the study hall it is his sense of sight that incites him to relate the colours of the earth to the brushes Dante had. So one more time from the external world and thanks to a process of assimilation, which from now on could be known as Stream of sensitivity, the so–called stream of consciousness takes place.

But it is also in this same passage that a new fact can be observed. As it has already been mentioned, Stream of sensitivity influences stream of consciousness, but this time it is easy to see how stream of consciousness creates or highlights Stephen's emotions because after he thinks how his burial would have been "his mouth was hot and dry" (27). So this time a double process takes place: First an emotion (Stream of sensitivity) enables him to carry out some associations (stream of consciousness) that at the same time make him go through certain feelings (Stream of sensitivity). However, the difference is that our Stream of sensitivity is just a way of perceiving the external world whereas what Stephen feels after thinking about his death is just the result of the terror he feels after relating facts. So this should be seen as a sign of Stephen's extreme sensitivity as he is influenced not only by the external world but also by the inner world he creates.

As has been aforementioned, one of the functions of Stream of sensitivity is to describe places and people, but it is also used by Stephen to show his inclination towards certain matters such as religion. In fact, it is possible to contemplate Stephen's relation to Church and religion throughout the whole novel, but it is specially through his senses that he describes what he feels for such an institution, as when he is told that some fellows have stolen the sacristy: " a faint sickness of awe made him feel weak", "He thought of the dark silent sacristy. There were dark wooden presses there where the crimped surplices lay quietly folded". " The boy that held the censer had swung it lifted It had burned quietly as the fellow had swung it gently and has given off a weak sour smell" (46). Here, we can notice the air of mystery when he is brought into relation with religion.

Nevertheless one may wonder how he feels when being punished: "A hot burning stinging tingling blow like the loud crack of a broken stick made his trembling hand crumple together like a leaf in the fire: and at the sound and the pain scalding tears were driven into his eyes" (57). This happens when the prefect of studies hits him on his hand with a pandybat. However it will not be

– 8.

till he makes his own decision of punishing himself for the sins he has committed that he will suffer such a repression of his most delicate treasure; his senses.

So it is possible to find examples of this kind as the novel goes on, but the most essential part concerning his senses appears when he hears the sermons by the priest about the punishment of sinners in hell. This awakens in him a feeling of repentance and as a sign of penitence he concludes that he has to suffer and his conclusion is that the best way to torture himself is by repressing his senses, neutralizing this way the possibility of connection between the external world and himself:

Each of his senses was brought under a rigorous discipline. In order to mortify the sense of sight he made it his rule to walk in the street with downcast eyes, glancing neither to right nor left nor never behind him.... From time to time also he balked them by a sudden effort of the will, as by lifting them suddenly in the middle of an unfinished sentence and enclosing the book. To mortify his hearing he exerted no control over his voice which was them breaking, neither sang nor whistled, and made no attempt to flee from noises which caused him painful nervous irritation such as the sharpening of knives of the knifeboard, the gathering of cinders ... To mortify his smell was more difficult as he found in himself no instinctive repugnance to bad odours ... such as those of dung or tag ... He found in the end that the only odour against which his sense of smell revolted was a certain stale fishy stink like that of longstanding urine ... To mortify the taste he practiced strict habits at table, observed to the letter all the fasts of the Church and sought by distraction to divert his mind from the savours of different foods. But it was to the mortification of touch he brought the most assiduous ingenuity of inventiveness. He never consciously changed his position in bed, sat in the most uncomfortable positions, suffered patiently every itch and pain, kept away from the fire ... (171–172)

So from this many conclusions may be drawn as to the fact that his sense of touch was the hardest to control or that his sense of smell was not very difficult to punish.

It is also curious how the intentions of some people are described by what Stephen feels, as when talking with the priest and tried to be convinced to enter the order: Stephen followed also with his ears the accents and intervals of the priest's voice as he spoke gravely and cordially of different themes.(175), "The listened in reverent silence now to the priest's appeal and through the words he heard even more distinctly a voice bidding him approach, offering him secret knowledge and secret power" (181).

– 9.

Stephen then thought about the consequences of entering the order and those consequences could not be described by simple thoughts or using simple adjectives, but through his senses applying this way another function to them, that of evaluating his immediate reality by means of his senses:

No touch of sin would linger upon the hands with which he would elevate and break the host;

no touch of sin would linger on his lips in prayer to make him eat and drink damnation to

himself not discerning the body of the Lord. (181)

And yet when he refused that proposition, his senses were the most useful means to reach at that conclusion. Thus, we can see that Stephen's senses are so important for him as to determine the choice of what his future is offering to him.

The troubling odour of the long corridors of Clongowes came back to him and he heard the

discreet murmur of the burning gasflames ... His lungs dilated and sank as if he were

inhaling a warm moist unsustaining air and he smelt again the moist warm air which hung in

the bath in Conglowes above the sluggish turfcoloured water. (183)

Later on there is also an important part in the novel where Joyce himself describes our Stream of sensitivity himself since he explains the process that has been mentioned so many times: First the impression of something, in this case the first moments of morning that he describes by the impression it has on him. Then, his mind was waking slowly, that is, after the impressions he has experienced through his senses, he realizes, through a process of association between the external and his knowledge of reality, that morning is coming.

So, in just a few moments, two phenomena have taken place in Stephen: The fact of feeling and the process of the association of that impression with his inner knowledge about the world.

Towards the dawn he awoke. O what a sweet music!. His soul was all dewy wet. Over his limbs in sleep pale cool waves of light had passed. He lay still, as if his soul lay amid cool waters, conscious of faint sweet music. His mind was waking slowly to a tremulous morning knowledge, a morning inspiration. (246)

As has been demonstrated there is an incredible amount of examples through the entire work, and in fact, instances are present almost in every single page. However there are climatic

– 10.

parts in the work in which the five senses have even more intense functions as when Stephen realizes what he has to be, what he has to do, that is, the moment of the epiphany: "His heart trembled; his breath came faster and a wild spirit passed over his limbs .." (192). He had heard his friends calling him Stephaneфорos and then he saw a girl on a beach: "Her image had passed into his soul forever and no word had broken the holy silence of his ecstasy" (196).

Here, we can see how Stephen senses are so important for him that even in a moment so important as that of an inner revelation, his senses are playing a crucial part. His senses are determining his view about what is being presented to him and thanks to them, he can relate and remember facts. He now remembers that he had heard his friends calling him Stephaneфорos and that he saw a girl on a beach but the most important fact to pay attention to is that it is by means of these perceptions that the climatic point came to a resolution: he knew (intellectual process) what he had to do thanks to what he had felt (sensorial process of assimilation).

At the end of the work a lack of effectiveness may be found in Stephen's senses, as he no longer needs one single emotion but instead he needs to make sure of what he perceives with more than one sense. This could be associated with the fact that, to some extent, his fate determined at this point that he had already developed his theories, and that his senses were not so sharp as when he was a little boy since they did not need details anymore, and they had suffered a deterioration: "He spoke the verses aloud from the first lines till the music and rhythm suffused his mind, turning it to quiet indulgence; then copied them painfully to feel them better by seeing them" (252), " No sound was to be heard; but he knew that all around him life was about to awaken in common noises, hoarse voices, sleepy prayers. Shrinking from that life he turned the wall" (252). In this way Stephen expresses his tiredness of "common noises", noises that, as he had heard before a thousand times, his senses had no necessity of perceiving again. In fact this is how Stephen now looked at the sky when seeing birds fly: "The air of the late March evening made clear their flight, their dark darting quivering bodies flying clearly against the sky as against a limphung cloth of smoky tenuous blue" (255), or when he talks about noises when the cries he had once hated so much seemed to soften: "Their cry was shrill and clear and fine and falling like threads of silken light unwound from whirring spools. The inhuman clamour soothed his ears in which his mother's sobs and reproaches murmured insistently" (255).

– 11.

Thus, finally, the importance of Stream of sensitivity has been demonstrated. The main functions that these sensorial aspects create have been also exposed and explained: First they contribute to perceive the external world through emotions and feelings. Secondly, they contribute to make possible relations in the character's mind. Thirdly, they are used by the author to describe

Stephen's progress from childhood to adulthood. And finally, they are the main and more important method used to make this novel an unprecedented one, not only because of the descriptions of the emotions or the other uses already pointed out, but also because of the involvement they produce in the reader, who experiences all the emotions through Stephen's own mind.

So it would not be enough to say that Stephen has, since the beginning in this novel, perceived the world around him primarily in terms of his sensory awareness of it", but that these senses are the essential point to make Joyce's work a unique one, an extraordinarily organised picture of emotions, feelings, impressions, perceptions and above all, the main way of acquiring knowledge from the external and material world.

– 12.

#### Works Cited

Cuddon, J. A. *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980.

Joyce, James. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996.