

Samples of Flashback and Stream-of-Consciousness

Flashback:

Here is such a flashback to childhood (without the context and transition) from a novel-in-progress by Wayne Smith. The frequent flashbacks are italicized in the original:

She stood atop the monkey bars and smiled at me. Her long lean body clad in red short shorts. Olive skin browned by the summer sun. She smiled at me. I returned the smile I guess, I wasn't sure. Awestruck by her beauty I couldn't feel my body. She was fourteen, I... thirteen. Tina Martinez, my first older woman. She swung through the bars her body brimming with athleticism and sex. Like many a Latina her age, the heavy Spring rains produced a hothouse flower in full bloom. We stood and watched this woman in body, clad in little girl short shorts. We being my best friend Billy Tuttle and myself. Billy was usually more interested in food than girls, but on that day he ate his chips more slowly than normal. Ray Tuttle, Billy's older brother, entered the yard and took in the show.

"Is that your girl?" he asked. I heard him but I couldn't speak.

Between chips Billy replied, "Yeah she likes him." Ray was a prick. He constantly abused my best friend as only an older brother could. But when it came to women he was an experienced prick. He looked at me and nodded. The nod of men. Approval. Acceptance. As can only be bestowed by one man upon another. All in the nod of the head. Ray took one last look at my hothouse flower and walked on. Heat rushed through my body like blood returning to a limp extremity. Yet to experience my first kiss and already I had gotten the nod. My dick would have gotten hard had I known its purpose.¹

¹ Wayne Smith, novel-in-progress. For more information, or get in touch with Wayne Smith, email him at wayneyboy@aol.com.

Intimate senses throw us into a flashback
Proust *In Search of Lost Time*

...one day in winter, on my return home, my mother, seeing that I was cold, offered me some tea, a thing I did not ordinarily take. I declined at first, and then, for no particular reason, changed my mind. She sent for one of those squat, plump little cakes called "petites madeleines," which look as though they had been moulded in the fluted valve of a scallop shell. And soon, mechanically, dispirited after a dreary day with the prospect of a depressing morrow, I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory- this new sensation having had on me the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me it was me. I had ceased now to feel mediocre, contingent, mortal. Whence could it have come to me, this all-powerful joy? I sensed that it was connected with the taste of the tea and the cake, but that it infinitely transcended those savours, could, no, indeed, be of the same nature. Whence did it come? What did it mean? How could I seize and apprehend it?²

And what he discovers is precisely the past recaptured that becomes his novel, the monumental and wonderful *Remembrance of Things Past*. It begins with the taste of a cookie soaked in tea, and we accept this because we have all had the experience of how a smell, a taste, can send us to another place, another time.

Joyce Stream-of-Consciousness in *Ulysses*

Another slice of bread and butter: three, four, right. She didn't like her plate full. Right. He turned from the tray, lifted the kettle off the hob and set it sideways on the fire. It sat there, dull and squat, its spout stuck out. Cup of tea soon. Good. Mouth dry. The cat walked stiffly round a leg of the table with tail on high.³

² Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past. Swann's Way*: (translated by C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin. New York: Vintage.) pp. 48-51. Or, online, go to <http://www.authorama.com/remembrance-of-things-past-3.html> and search for "petites madeleines."

³ James Joyce, *Ulysses*, Episode 4, Calypso. Also see online at <http://www.online-literature.com/view.php/ulysses/4>

Tolstoy War Stream of Consciousness

Stream of Consciousness is under stress- moments when the rational mind is not in the forefront, when information comes at us piecemeal and with great intensity. Here is an old sample, predating the so-called Modernists by fifty or sixty years that shows an excellent use of stream of consciousness. This is from Tolstoy's *Sevastopol Sketches*, and the scene is a battle, the passage is the thoughts running through the mind of a soldier as a shell comes towards their line:

"Who will it hit- Mikhaylov or me? Or both of us? And if me, whereabouts? If it's the head then I'm done for; but if it's the leg, they'll cut it off, and I'll certainly ask for chloroform and I may survive. But maybe only Mikhaylov will be hit, then I'll be able to tell how we were walking side by side, and he was killed and I was splashed with blood. No, it's nearer me... it'll be me." Then he remembered the twelve roubles he owed Mikhaylov, remembered also a debt in Petersburg which should have been paid long ago; a gypsy song he had sung the night before came into his head; the woman he loved appeared in his imagination wearing a bonnet with lilac ribbons;"But perhaps it won't explode," he thought, and with a desperate resolve tried to open his eyes. But at that moment a red fire pierced his eyes through his still closed eyelids....⁴

Notice that this is structured as the quoted thoughts of the character. This is generally not necessary today, as readers now are accustomed to the convention of slipping into the minds of characters without special punctuation. The foray into the soldier's mind has the same weight as a spoken line would have, except that here we are deep in a crucial, indeed life-or-death, moment. Like Joyce, Tolstoy uses a little narration here to capture some fragments of the man's ordinary life- the debt, a couple of memories linked to sense impressions: sound of a song, a bonnet with lilac ribbons. This is an excellent case of using stream of consciousness to stretch and capture a moment.

⁴Lev Tolstoy, *Sevastopol Sketches* (New York: Penguin, 1986) p. 96-97.