

## Narration and *Mrs. Dalloway*

The notion of connectedness, and especially of characters connected to each other at some deep level, is related to at least two narrative techniques that Woolf was experimenting with in *Mrs. Dalloway*, **free indirect discourse** and **tunneling**.

**Free indirect discourse** is a term scholars use to describe the way narrative point of view shifts in novels like *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*. It's a modification of two standard modes of discourse we all use:

direct discourse: Mrs. Dalloway said, I'll buy the flowers myself.

indirect discourse: Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.

In direct discourse, the speaker's words are usually quoted and the speaker is directly identified. In indirect discourse, someone else is speaking, perhaps paraphrasing what someone else has said. The technique of indirect discourse becomes *free indirect discourse* (FID) when an author weaves a character's thoughts into the narrative in such a way that it is hard to tell whether they are the characters' thoughts, someone else's thoughts about the character, or the narrators comments. In a single passage, such as the opening page of *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf may quickly shift from one character's perspective to another. This technique tends to destabilize the authority of the omniscient narrator, which can be read as a male perspective and which Woolf increasingly rejects. In this way, Woolf allows us into characters' minds as though we were disembodied spirits, which in some respects we are when we are reading literature. (For more on FID, see Kathy Mezei's "Who is Speaking Here?" in *Ambiguous Discourse*, 1996.)

Hillis Miller discusses this same narrative strategy in *Mrs. Dalloway* (see his "Repetition As the Raising of the Dead"), but does not call it FID. Instead, he links it to what Woolf called **tunneling**. Miller claims that (in the words of the bibliography annotation) by going deeply into each [character's] mind, there is a point when the mind of one character and the minds of all characters become one. The term tunneling comes from two diary entries written while Woolf was writing *Mrs. Dalloway* (which then had the working title *The Hours*):

*I have no time to describe my plans. I should say a good deal about The Hours, & my discovery; how I dig out beautiful caves behind my characters; I think that gives exactly what I want; humanity, humour, depth. The idea is that the caves shall connect, & each comes to daylight at the present moment "The idea is that the caves shall connect, & each comes to daylight at the present moment" (Diary, vol. 1, August 30, 1923, p 263)*

*I am stuffed with ideas for it [Mrs. Dalloway]. I feel I can use up everything I've ever thought. Certainly, I'm less coerced than I've yet been. The doubtful point is, I think, the character of Mrs. Dalloway. It may be too stiff, too glittering and tinselly. But then I can bring innumerable other characters to her support. I wrote the 100th page today. Of course, I've only been feeling my way into it--up till last August anyhow. It took me a year's groping to discover what I call my **tunneling process**, by which I tell the past by installments, as I have need of it. This is my prime discovery so far. (my emphasis, Diary, vol. 2, October 15, 1923, p 272)*

### To demonstrate, let us look at applications of the devices of discourse:

1. Mary turned, stared, and asked herself, "Are these the tulips I saw here yesterday?" (direct discourse)
2. Mary turned, stared, and asked herself if these were the tulips she had seen there the day before. (indirect discourse)
3. Mary turned and stared. Were these the tulips she had seen here yesterday? (free indirect discourse/tunneling)

**What type of discourse is represented in the following passages?**

- A. Such fools we all are, she thought, crossing Victoria Street.
- B. For Heaven only knows why one loves it so, how one sees it so, making it up, building it round one, tumbling it, creating it every moment afresh; but the veriest frumps, the most dejected of miseries sitting on doorsteps (drink their downfall) do the same; can't be dealt with, she felt positive, by Acts of Parliament for that very reason: they love life.
- C. In people's eyes, in the swing, tramp, trudge; in the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved; life; London; this moment of June.
- D. "I love walking in London," said Mrs. Dalloway. "Really it's better than walking in the country."
- E. They had just come up--unfortunately--to see doctors. Other people came to see pictures; go to the opera; take their daughters out; the Whitbreads came "to see doctors."