**Free Indirect Discourse Exercise**

NOT: Hills Like White Elephants

RATHER: Tunnels Like Dark Caverns

**First, some background:**

Free indirect discourse is often used when a writer is working in third-person, limited narration, It can be used to "zoom" in and out of sensibilities of a single character, transitioning, say, from the close feelings and senses of a character to the narrator speaking in its own right. This technique can also be used to create a sense of simultaneity, by piercing the sensibilities of a variety of characters, in the manner of a roving third-person, limited narration. Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* makes great use of this roving technique and she articulates it best, almost philosophically, as a defense of her novels in a curious short fiction called "The Mark on the Wall" in which she imagines “[a] world without professors or specialists or house-keepers with the profiles of policemen, a world which one could slice with one’s thought as a fish slices the water with his fin.”

For my part, I think of it as telescoping away from the narrator in its capacity for speaking (sometimes even self-consciously, though rarely) a) in its own right, to b) on behalf of a character or character(s), and to c) in an indistinguishable area in which the narrator’s voice seems to take on qualities of a character. This is one delicious aspect of fiction writing; it gives rich texture to a multiplicity of voices, and sets the stage for so many modern and post-modern undertakings in the 20th and 21st centuries, eras characterized by not a single, monological voice but of dialogical ones, voices competing to be heard.

Telescoping a) => b) => c)

a) Narrator narrating in its own right:

**Direct discourse: She said, "I will stay here tomorrow."**

b) Narrator narrating on behalf of character:

**Indirect discourse: "She thought she would stay there the next day."**

c) Narrator taking on qualities of characters’ sensibilities:

**Free indirect discourse: She would stay here tomorrow.**

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**Next, an Illustration from *Mrs. Dalloway*:**

I thought I’d undo the magic of Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* by taking a passage written in free indirect discourse and rewriting it in direct and indirect discourse. I apologize to Virginia ahead of time!—I just want to show the difference:

**Mayo’s rewritten passage:**

Clarissa guessed she had lived Westminster for over twenty years.

Then she thought, “In all those years, sometimes, in the midst of the traffic, or waking at night, I’ve felt an indescribable pause.”

She wondered, “Perhaps that feeling might just be my heart, affected by influenza.”

Big Ben struck.

“There!” she thought.

Out it boomed again.

To Clarrisa, the clock’s bell seemed a warning. She thought, “It’s musical, but reminds me that the hour has passed.”

The leaden circles of sound dissolved in the air.

**Woolf’s original passage:**

For having lived in Westminster — how many years now? over twenty — one feels even in the midst of the traffic, or waking at night, Clarissa was positive, a particular hush, or solemnity; an indescribable pause; a suspense (but that might be her heart, affected, they said, by influenza) before Big Ben strikes. There! Out it boomed. First a warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable (1). The leaden circles dissolved in the air.

(1) Part of the challenge of rewriting Woolf’s free indirect style is to decide which language evokes the narrator’s sensibilities and which Clarissa’s. It’s the nature of free indirect style to blend these two. So—I use as an illustration the word ‘irrevocable.’ I’ve removed it from my rewrite because it seems the narrator’s sensibilities—a more self-conscious awareness of themes of death in the novel.

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**Now, the Writing Exercise**

Time: about 15-20 minutes.

Task: Consider the lines from Hemingway’s “Hills Like White Elephants,” a notoriously spare story in mainly direct style, like his story “The Killers.” Rewrite this in free indirect style. Often, modernists like Woolf take an EXTERNAL conflict (the contentious ‘operation’ in the passage below) and use free indirect style to develop conflicts about the subject INTERNAL to a character. So—you can explore this internal tension in free indirect style in:

a) THE SENSIBILITIES OF ONE CHARACTER (single 3rd-person, limited POV), or

b) THE SENSIBILITIES OF BOTH CHARACTERS (dual roving 3rd-person POV).

Use your imagination regarding the subject of the ‘operation.’ You do NOT need to rewrite the whole passage; for example, you may only want to use the 4th and 5th lines below as a jumping off point. (The tension is certainly implied there—the ‘girl’ is not exactly thrilled with the man’s pushing the ‘operation.’) We’ll share some of these with the class as a whole.

The warm wind blew the bead curtain against the table.

"The beer’s nice and cool," the man said.

"It’s lovely," the girl said.

"It’s really an awfully simple operation, Jig," the man said. “It’s not really an operation at all.”

The girl looked at the ground the table legs rested on.

"I know you wouldn’t mind it, Jig. It’s really not anything. It’s just to let the air in."

The girl did not say anything.

"I’ll go with you and I’ll stay with you all the time. They just let the air in and then it’s all perfectly natural."

"Then what will we do afterwards?"

"We’ll be fine afterwards. Just like we were before."

"What makes you think so?"