

College Prep ELA: Modernist Narrative Structure & Stream of Consciousness



Name: _____ Date: _____

Read the excerpt below adapted from Virginia Woolf's modernist masterpiece *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). Analyze how Woolf utilizes free indirect discourse and shifting temporal awareness.

The Unbroken Plunge of Consciousness

Excerpt from Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). The questions and analysis prompts are original practice.

Source: *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf — <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/71865>

What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her, when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air. How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was) solemn, feeling as she did, standing there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen.

She stiffened a little on the kerb, waiting for Durtnall's van to pass. A charming woman, Scrope Purvis thought her (knowing her as one does know people who live next door in Westminster); a touch of the bird about her, of the jay, blue-green, light, vivacious, though she was over fifty, and grown very white since her illness. There she hovered, poised on the kerb, not seeing him, waiting to cross, very upright.

1. How does Woolf's structural choice to transition seamlessly from Clarissa's sensory memory of Bourton ('What a lark! What a plunge!') to London street traffic ('waiting for Durtnall's van to pass') challenge traditional Victorian narrative conventions?

- A. It demonstrates that the character has lost all mental sanity and should be hospitalized.
- B. It dismantles rigid chronological plot progression in favor of psychological temporality, where past memory and present sensation coexist simultaneously in human consciousness.
- C. It proves the narrator forgot what city the story was taking place in.
- D. It is an accidental editing error common in early 20th-century typesetting.

2. In the second paragraph, the narrative perspective fluidly slips from Clarissa's private thoughts into the external observations of her neighbor Scrope Purvis ('A charming woman, Scrope Purvis thought her...'). This literary technique is termed:

- A. First-person epistolary diary
- B. Free indirect discourse / fluid focalization, blurring the boundaries between narrator, protagonist, and bystander
- C. Strict second-person instructional imperative
- D. Objective journalistic non-fiction

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3. The contrast between the joyful exuberance of 'What a lark! What a plunge!' and the ominous premonition 'that something awful was about to happen' primarily foreshadows:
- A. The psychological trauma, mortality, and existential alienation lingering across European society in the immediate aftermath of World War I
 - B. A surprise party that Clarissa is throwing for her family
 - C. A sudden thunderstorm that cancels her shopping trip
 - D. A comedic misunderstanding with her neighbor

Identify one piece of evidence from paragraph 1 or 2 that supports the psychological interiority of Clarissa:

How does Woolf's narrative technique reflect the post-war psychological climate?
