Overview - James Joyce

James Joyce

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- **Born:** February 02, 1882 in Rathgar, Ireland
- **Died:** January 13, 1941 in Zurich, Switzerland
- **Other Names:** Joyce, James Augustine Aloysius
- **Nationality:** Irish
- **Occupation:** Writer

The fiction of the Irish author James Joyce (1882-1941) is characterized by experiments with language, symbolism, and use of the narrative techniques of interior monologue and stream of consciousness.

The modern symbolic novel owes much of its complexity to James Joyce. His intellectualism and his grasp of a wide range of philosophy, theology, and foreign languages enabled him to stretch the English language to its limits (and, some critics believe, beyond them in *Finnegans Wake*). The trial of his novel *Ulysses* on charges of obscenity and its subsequent exoneration marked a breakthrough in the limitations previously placed by social convention upon the subject matter and language of the modern English novel.

James Joyce was born on February 2, 1882, in Rathgar, a suburb of Dublin. His father, John, an amateur actor and popular tenor, was employed first in a Dublin distillery, then as tax collector for the city of Dublin. His mother, Mary Jane Murray Joyce, was a gifted pianist. Endowed with a fine tenor voice and a love for music (he once entered a singing competition against the noted Irish tenor John McCormack), James Joyce was described by his brother Stanislaus as tall, thin, and loose-jointed, with "a distinguished appearance and bearing." In spite of 10 major operations to save his sight, he was almost blind at the time of his death. He often wore a black patch over his left eye and dressed in somber colors, although his friends remember him as witty and gay in company.

Joyce was educated entirely in Jesuit schools in Ireland: Clongowes Wood College in County Kildare, Belvedere College in Dublin, and University College, where he excelled in philosophy and languages (he mastered Norwegian in order to read Henrik Ibsen's plays in the original). After his graduation in 1902, he left Ireland in a self-imposed exile that lasted for the rest of his life. He returned briefly in 1903 for his mother's last illness but left for Paris in 1904 after her death, taking with him Nora Barnacle, his future wife. Until 1915 he taught English in Trieste, then moved to Zurich with his wife and two children. In 1920 they settled in Paris, living in virtual poverty even after the successful publication of *Ulysses* in 1922. The intervention of literary friends such as Ezra Pound secured for Joyce some much-needed financial assistance from the British government.

Although his fame rests upon his fiction, Joyce's first published work was a volume of 36 lyric poems, *Chamber Music* (1907). His *Collected Poems* (including *Poems Penyeach* and *Ecce*
"Puer" appeared in 1938. Much of his fiction is lyrical and autobiographical in nature and shows the influence of his musical studies, his discipline as a poet, and his Jesuit training. Even though he cut himself off from his country, his family, and his Church, these three (Ireland, father, and Roman Catholicism) are the basis upon which he structured his art. The city of Dublin, in particular, provided Joyce with a universal symbol; for him the heart of Dublin was "the heart of all the cities of the world," a means of showing that "in the particular is contained the universal."

**Early Fiction**

*Dubliners* (1914) is a collection of 15 short stories completed in 1904 but delayed in publication because of censorship problems, which arose from a suspected slur against the reigning monarch, Edward VII. Joyce himself described their style as one of "scrupulous meanness" and said they were written "to betray the soul of that ... paralysis which many consider a city." His characters are drawn in naturalistic detail, which at first aroused the anger of many readers. Among various devices such as symbolism, motifs (paralysis, death, isolation, failure of love), mythic journeys, and quests for a symbolic grail which is never there, Joyce employs his literary invention, the epiphany; this is a religious term he used to describe the symbolic dimension of common things--fragments of conversation or bits of music--moments of sudden spiritual manifestation in which the "soul" of the thing or the experience "leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance."

In the final story, considered one of Joyce's best, "The Dead," Gabriel Conroy, a careful and studious man surrounded by doting aunts and material comforts, discovers to his surprise that his wife has had a romantic love affair with a passionate young man who died for love of her. The story ends with snow falling softly over Ireland and the universe, an ambiguous symbol which could mean either life-giving moisture and preservation or the coldness of moral and spiritual death.

*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) is a semi-autobiographical novel of adolescence, or *Bildungsroman* (development novel). A sensitive and artistic young man, Stephen Dedalus is shaped by his environment but at the same time rebels against it. He rejects his father, family, and religion, and, like Joyce, decides at the novel's close to leave Ireland. He states as the reason for his exile his mission "to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race." The hero's symbolic name is drawn from Ovid's Dedalus, the artificer who made wings on which his son flew too near the sun, melting their wax and causing him to plunge into the sea.

For Joyce and others after him, Dedalus became a symbol for the artist, and the hero, Stephen, appears again in *Ulysses* (1922). Joyce's portrait of the artist in adolescence is like a painting, showing the hero in his immaturity, still seeking his identity. His major flaw, the failure to love, is shown by Stephen's isolation, his inability to immerse himself in life. The hero's declaration, "I will not serve," links him with another soaring figure, Lucifer, whose sin of pride also precluded the possibility of love, which for Joyce (always doctrinally orthodox) represented the greatest of all the Christian virtues and the most humanizing.
*Ulysses* (1922), generally considered Joyce's most mature work, is patterned on Homer's *Odyssey*. Each of the 18 chapters corresponds loosely with an episode in the Greek epic, but there are echoes of Joyce's other models, Dante's *Inferno* and Goethe's *Faust*, among other sources. The action takes place in a single day, June 16, 1904 (still observed as "Bloomsday" in many countries), on which the Irish Jew, Leopold Bloom (*Ulysses*), walks or rides through the streets of Dublin after leaving his wife, Molly (Penelope), at home in bed.

Through the stream-of-consciousness technique, Joyce permits the reader to enter the consciousness of Bloom and perceive the chaos of fragmentary conversations, physical sensations, and memories which register there. Underlying the surface action is the mythic quest of Leopold for a son to replace the child he and Molly have lost. He finds instead Stephen Dedalus (Telemachus), who, having rejected his family and faith, is in need of a father. At each of their chance encounters during the day, the mythic quest becomes more evident. The two are finally united when Bloom rescues the drunken Stephen from unsavory companions and the police; they share a symbolic communion over cups of hot chocolate in Bloom's home, a promise of future involvement for Stephen with Leopold, his spiritual "father," and Molly, the earth mother, who, with her paramours, represents fleshly involvement in the experience of life. Joyce's technical innovations (particularly his extensive use of stream of consciousness), his experiments with form, and his unusually frank subject matter and language made *Ulysses* an important milestone in the development of the modern novel.

**Finnegans Wake**

*Finnegans Wake* (1939) is the most difficult of all Joyce's works. The novel has no evident narrative or plot and relies upon sound, rhythm of language, and verbal puns to present a surface beneath which meanings lurk. Considered a novel by most critics, it has been called a poem by some, a nightmare by others. Joyce called his final book a "nightmaze." It concerns the events of a Dublin night, in contrast to *Ulysses*, which deals with a Dublin day.

The submerged plot centers upon a male character, H. C. Earwicker, the genial host of a Dublin pub, his wife, and their children, particularly the twins, Kevin and Jerry. Joyce employs myth in a more complex pattern than ever before, associating Dublin with the fallen paradise and the hero with a long series of heroes beginning with Adam; he associates him also with a geographic landmark in Dublin, the Hill of Howth. His wife, Anna Livia Plurabelle, is associated with the river Liffey and with various female figures from history and legend. Snatches of Irish and universal history are blended with realistic details of world history and geography.

Working in the metamorphic tradition of Ovid, Joyce causes his characters to undergo a dazzling series of transformations. The hero, H. C. E. (his nickname, "Here Comes Everybody," indicates an Everyman figure), becomes successively Adam, Humpty Dumpty, Ibsen's Master Builder (all of whom underwent a fall of some kind in literature), Christ, King Arthur, the Duke of Wellington (all of whom are associated with rising). Mrs. Earwicker becomes Eve, the Virgin Mary, Queen Guinevere, Napoleon's Josephine, and other feminine characters (her initials, A. L. P., designate her as the alpha figure, the feminine principle and initiator of life). The twins become rival principles, Shem and Shaun, extrovert and introvert, representing opposing facets of their father's character; they merge into all the rival "brothers" of literature and history--Cain
and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Peter and Paul, Michael and Lucifer--and their quarreling gives rise to the famous battles of myth and cyclic history.

Geographic places around Dublin also take on symbolic significance; for example, the noted Dublin garden, Phoenix Park, becomes the Garden of Eden. The difficulties arising from the complicated symbolism and linguistic structure of verbal puns and double meanings become more complex with Joyce's introduction of unfamiliar foreign words which may have two, three, or more meanings in the various languages with which he was familiar (including Danish and Eskimo). Examples may be seen in the compression of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the writers of the New Testament Gospels, into "Mamalujo"; the Garden of Eden appears in one of its many doubles in modern Ireland as "Edenberry, Dubblen, W.C."

Beneath the puzzling verbal surface of *Finnegans Wake* lie themes which have been the concern of traditional writers and philosophers of all ages--the process of renewal through division of opposites, rising and falling, the one in the many, permanence and change, and the dialectic emergence of truth from the opposition of antithetical ideas. Not unexpectedly, *Finnegans Wake* was not well received by the reading public, and Joyce was forced to seek financial help from friends after its publication. With the outbreak of World War II, he and his family fled, on borrowed money, from France to Switzerland, leaving a daughter in a sanatorium in occupied France. Joyce died in Zurich on January 13, 1941.

Naxos released a complete recording of *Ulysses* on 23 CDs for the hundredth anniversary of the first Bloomsday, June 16, 1904. Irish actor Jim Norton read the text, recorded at the University of York, and Roger Marsh directed. A decade earlier the same group had released a four-CD abridged version.

A number of Joyce letters and personal items have been unearthed and offered at auction over the years. Among them were a sexually explicit love letter written to Nora Barnacle in 1909 and sold for $445,000 in 2004, and a rare 1919 letter written by Joyce in Italian to a writer and translator. Joyce wished the writer to translate some of Joyce's works.

In 2002 Ireland purchased a collection of Joyce manuscripts for $11.7 million through Sotheby's in London. The artistic purchase was the largest made by the Irish state. Many of the papers had been hidden from the Germans by Paul and Lucie Léon when Joyce fled to Switzerland in 1940. The French couple stole some of the manuscripts from Joyce's apartment in Paris before the landlord could confiscate them because Joyce had not paid his rent.

Several of Joyce's works have been adapted for films, among them *The Dead* (1987 and 2004), adapted from *Dubliners; The Wake* (*Finnegans Wake*, 2000); and *Bloom*, starring Stephen Rea, adapted from *Ulysses*, in 2003. The author's creations also appeared in various forms on Broadway. *Exiles*, an original play directed by Burgess Meredith, was performed at the Neighborhood Playhouse in New York City in 1925. *Ulysses in Nighttown*, adapted from Joyce's novel, was staged at the Winter Garden Theatre in New York City in 1974. The production earned a Tony Award for lighting by Jules Fisher and a Drama Desk Award for performance by Zero Mostel. *James Joyce's The Dead*, a musical drama, opened January 11, 2000, for 120 performances at the Belasco Theatre in New York City. Richard Nelson won a Tony Award for best book of a musical for his writing, and Stephen Spinella was awarded the 2000 Drama Desk
Award for outstanding featured actor in a musical. The Medicine Show Theatre Ensemble off-Broadway production of *Finnegans Wake* was staged in April of 2005.

## Further Readings

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