

## James Joyce (1882-1941 )

Joyce was an Irishman, like so many other figures in "English" literature (Swift, Yeats, Shaw, Beckett, etc) He was born in Dublin in 1882, of a middle-class Irish Catholic family. His father, John Stanislaus Joyce, was to be an immense influence on Joyce's work, despite - or perhaps because of - his many faults. At the time of Joyce's birth, his father had a good job and the family enjoyed a reasonably comfortable economic position; but it gradually became impoverished as Joyce's father took and lost a succession of jobs, falling - or being kicked - down the social ladder.

In 1888 young James was sent away to boarding school at Clongowes Wood College, a Catholic institution run by the Jesuit order: the Jesuits were responsible for all of Joyce's education, even at university. He always retained the disciplined intelligence and intellectual subtlety he had learnt from the Jesuits, long after he had abandoned their doctrines Joyce's schooldays under the Jesuits provide much of the material for the earlier chapters of his autobiographical novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

Among the important influences in his childhood was that of Irish nationalist politics, and especially the tragedy of Parnell, the Irish nationalist leader. Here, too, Joyce learnt of public affairs largely through his father's reaction to them. His father was a passionate supporter of Parnell, the Protestant leader of the Irish Home Rule movement, which was fighting for independence from Britain in the 1880's and 1890's.

After Parnell's death in 1891, Joyce's father, a defeated and disappointed man, took little interest in Irish nationalist politics, and Joyce himself adopted a similar attitude of disillusioned detachment from Irish political extremism, as well as from the nationalist movement in literature, which was then at its height and was producing interesting and original work. It must be said that the Irish repaid this indifference by a similar unconcern with Joyce's work: he had immense difficulty getting it published in his homeland during his own lifetime. Joyce was a brilliant student. At school he won scholarship after scholarship, so assisting his family's deteriorating finances. At the same time his opposition to the social and religious conventions was growing into open rebellion. In the 1890's he came under the influence of Ibsen, then regarded as a highly immoral and dangerous writer. Joyce admired both Ibsen's intellectual honesty and his choice of exile from his homeland. Just as Ibsen's work was being attacked as "subversive" and "morbid", so Joyce's work was to meet with similar hostility.

In 1898 Joyce entered the newly established University College, a Catholic institution, where he studied modern languages. He proved to be a brilliant linguist (a quality which is apparent in the polyglot puns of his later works), but he resolutely refused to form any plans to follow a profession In 1902, having taken his degree, Joyce left Ireland for the first time. His destination was Paris, where he met expatriate Irish nationalists as well as various literary figures.

He made a second trip to Paris a year later, but this time his visit was cut short by his mother's death. He remained in Ireland, living very precariously, drinking too much (frequently in the company of his father), and spending most of his time in dissolute idleness. His sexual needs - irrepresible ever since adolescence drove him to prostitutes, and his poverty led him to live by borrowing from friends, acquaintances and even strangers.

In 1904 Joyce took the two steps that were to determine the direction of his life and save him from complete self-destruction in Dublin. He met Nora Barnacle, the woman who was to be his lifelong companion, and with her he left Ireland for voluntary exile on the Continent.

Nora Barnacle was working as a maid in a hotel when Joyce met her. She was a simple country girl who had come to Dublin, partly to escape from her father, who (like Joyce's) was a heavy drinker and kept his family poor. Despite the immense differences in their characters and especially their education, the relationship between Joyce and Nora was unusually happy and enduring.

In the same year the couple left Ireland, still unmarried (their marriage was celebrated much later, with the birth of their children). They first settled in Pola, Austria, where Joyce hoped to find work as a teacher of English, and then moved to Trieste, at that time still part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Here he stayed until 1915, teaching and working on his early books, *Dubliners* (a collection of short stories) and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. In 1906 he moved to Rome, where he had obtained a job as a clerk in a bank. After a year's stay in Rome, which he found strangely uninspiring, he returned to Trieste, where his pupils now included Ettore Schmitz (Italo Svevo), at that time an unknown author whose two early novels (*Una vita* and *Senilità*) had been ignored by the critics.

Finally, in 1914, *Dubliners* was published. It was not very successful in commercial terms, but it attracted the interest of the more intelligent critics, notably Ezra Pound, who eventually became Joyce's most helpful friend and critic. In the same year he began serial publication of his first novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, in the periodical "The Egoist".

With the outbreak of war, Joyce decided to move to a safer part of the world and took his wife and family to Zurich.

Though he remained poor, his reputation was growing, at least in intellectual circles. In Zurich he worked on his new novel, *Ulysses*, which was to take him seven years to write.

In 1920 he moved to Paris, and there *Ulysses* was finally completed in 1921 .

Meanwhile, the novel had begun publication in serial form in the "Little Review", an American avant-garde literary periodical.

Paris after the Great War was the intellectual capital of Europe, with painters like Picasso, Braque and Gris, and a colony of expatriate American intellectuals which included Pound, Hemingway and Gertrude Stein. Joyce was now one of the most distinguished writers in Paris, largely admired and adulated and at last able to provide for the needs of his family and to devote himself to his art without the pressing financial problems that had always beset him.

In the stimulating intellectual atmosphere of Paris Joyce felt able to push his experimenting with technique to its final extreme in his last work, *Finnegans Wake*, which occupied him from 1923 to 1939. Predictably enough, the immediate critical reaction to this work was bewilderment, a feeling that most readers still have when they approach *Finnegans Wake* for the first time. With the outbreak of war in 1939, Joyce returned to Zurich, where he died in 1941.

## Works

Joyce's life and works are in a sense the same thing since his entire development as a personality is also the development of his works as style and form. If we look at his works in their sequence of writing we are in turn looking at his life.

### Prose

- **Dubliners** (1914), a collection of fifteen short stories dealing with life in Dublin, linked by their common theme of the decay and stagnation of the city's life.
- **A portrait of the Artist as a Young Man** (1916), deals with the growth to maturity of a young Irishman and his dedication to art; it is largely a rehandling of autobiographical material, but the style is less "realistic" than in *Dubliners*. Its central figure is Stephen Dedalus, Joyce's fictional projection of himself, named after Stephen, the first Christian martyr (who was stoned to death for preaching the new religion (Stephen-Joyce thinks of himself as a victim of incomprehension in his own land), and Dedalus, the master craftsman of classical mythology, who was able to escape the confines of the labyrinth by creating two wax wings (Dedalus-Joyce decides to leave Ireland, his prison Island, on the "wings" of his art). The union of the two names, however, can evoke even more associations, for example with Daedalus' son, Icarus, who fell and died because he flew too close to the sun.
- **Ulysses** (1922), generally regarded as Joyce's masterpiece, was completed in 1921, published in 1922 in Paris, in 1933 in the United States and in 1936 in England (the delays being caused by problems with censorship).
- **Finnegans Wake** (1939) is Joyce's last work, even more complex and bewildering than *Ulysses*. Sections of *Finnegans Wake* were published in periodicals from 1924 on, and the whole was completed in 1939. It is about one night in the life of a Dublin pub-keeper, H.C. Earwicker, whose life story turns out to be that of all mankind. By making use of Giambattista Vico's cyclical view of history as a repetition of the same essential experiences, he provides a philosophical justification of his presentation of one man - H.C. Earwicker - as all men (as the initials of his name suggest: H.C.E. = Here Comes Everybody).
- **Stephen Hero** (1944), an abandoned fragment of Joyce's earliest attempt at a novel, was published after his death, in 1944.

### Poetry

- **Chamber Music** (1907), contains lyrics in the Pre-Raphaelite style.
- **Pomes Penyeach** (1927), a second collection of lyrics, also in a curiously traditional style.

### Drama

- **Exiles** (1918), Joyce's only attempt at drama, was a play in the realistic style of Ibsen.

## Joyce's conception of the artist

Joyce thought that the artist thought to be "invisible" in his works, in the sense that he must not express his own viewpoint. He should instead try to express the thoughts and experiences of other men. He advocated the total objectivity of the artist and his independence from all moral, religious or political pressures, since he "had to be outside all conventions, all normal society, and this not only because those conventions and that society, as Joyce found them in Dublin, represented a paralysis, a dead set of gestures having no meaning in terms of genuine human experience, but because the artist must be outside society in order to be objective (...)".

## Feature and themes

Apart from rejecting Irish nationalism, Joyce rejected Irish life "in toto". Yet at the same time he set all his novels in Dublin, the capital of the land he had grown up in and rejected, and his concern with the particulars of his life there was unflagging and obsessive.

He spent nearly all his adult life abroad, choosing a voluntary exile in Trieste, Zurich and Paris, and becoming the most cosmopolitan of Irish writers in his openness to the influence of other intellectual traditions.

Like other European writers of the time, in fact, he was deeply interested in all aspects of modern culture, including Freud's psychoanalysis, and in the experimentation that was affecting all fields of art (e.g. Picasso in painting).

Like other writers, he found himself involved in the controversy concerning the two most influential literary currents of the time, realism and symbolism (which had, meanwhile, developed into other side-currents such as naturalism on one side and futurism, impressionism and surrealism on the other). Joyce always refused to be classified in either movement, since realism and symbolism often combined in his works.

As a result of his interest in experimentation, he created a new kind of dream language, a mixture of existing words, inventive word combinations, and non-existent words, to provide a dense multi-layered prose that can be read on endless levels of significance. Syntax is disordered, punctuation non-existent, in this immense river of words.

For convenience' sake, Joyce's literary production is usually split into two periods, the turning point coinciding with the writing of *Ulysses*.

## First period

The first period of his work is marked by a realistic technique. The plot is quite linear in its development and rich in details; the syntax is logical and the language, far from being cerebral and distorted, reflects everyday language.

## Dubliners

One of the most significant works of this period is *Dubliners*. The fifteen stories the book is made up of were all written by 1905, except for *The Dead*, the longest and most ambitious, which was written in 1907. This is a remarkable achievement if one remembers that in 1905 Joyce was only twenty-three years o/d. The difficulty of finding a publisher, due to the supposed "immorality" of certain passages, led to their publication being delayed until 1914.

The work is an acute analysis of Dublin's life. Joyce himself wrote of it:

*"I wanted to write a chapter on the moral history of my country, and I chose Dublin for the scene because the city seemed to me the centre of paralysis."*

The stories are arranged in thematic sequence, divided into four sections, each of which represents one stage in life: childhood (*The Sisters*, *An Encounter*, *Araby*), adolescence (*Eveline*, *After the Race*, *The Gallants*, *The Boarding House*), maturity (*A Little Cloud*, *Counterparts*, *Clay*, *A Painful Case*) and public life (*Ivy Day in the Committee Room*, *A Mother*, *Grace*), plus an epilogue (*The Dead*).

## Epiphany

The style of the book is essentially realistic, with a scrupulous cataloguing of detail, the ability to create a sense of place - the Dublin which is the stories' setting - and remarkable moments of sudden insight, which are one of the characteristics of Joyce's art.

He called these moments of insight "epiphanies".

The original meaning of the term "epiphany" is, of course, the showing of the Christ child to the Magi: but Joyce adopts this expression to signify a sudden revelation, the moment in a novel or story when a sudden spiritual awakening is experienced, in which all the petty details, thoughts, gestures, objects, feelings, etc., come together to produce a new sudden awareness. In other words, there is an epiphany when details, or "moments", buried for years in one's memory, suddenly surface in one's mind and, like old photos, start a long, often painful mental labour.