



# *Finnegans Wake*

James Joyce  
(1939)

## THE TITLE

The title of this novel comes from an old Irish ballad, *Finnegan's Wake*, about a legendary bricklayer who fell off a scaffold having drunk too much; he was taken for dead, but came to life when the word whiskey (which etymologically means 'water of life') was mentioned.

The title anticipates the content of the novel; in fact, it is a pun: 'Finnegan' may be composed of two words: '*fin*' (from French) and '*again*', meaning 'completion and renewal', 'end and beginning', in an endless cycle. Moreover, if the apostrophe is restored in the title, *Finnegan's Wake*, it comes to mean 'the wake of Finnegan', or 'Finnegan is awake again'. The word 'wake' also has the meaning of a vigil after death, which is a further play on words between life and death.

## PLOT AND SETTING

*Finnegans Wake* tells the story of a night, a dream, a 'nightmaze', to use Joyce's word. It contains the whole of human history, from creation to the judgement day, in the guise of comic events happening to a family consisting of a father, mother and three children. They live in **Chapelizod, a district in the western suburbs of Dublin**. Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker is the father, commonly known by his initials, H. C. E., which may also stand for 'Here Comes Everybody'. He is the host of a pub called the Mullingar; his wife, Anna Livia, is mother to Isabel and the twins, Kevin and Jerry, better known as Shaun and Shem. Old Joe is the handyman at the pub and old Kate is the maid.

The story **begins in the evening and ends at dawn**; for this it is the story of a Dublin night, while *Ulysses* is the story of a Dublin day. At dusk the three children play outside the pub with the little girls of the neighbourhood. During their games, Shem and Shaun become rivals for the favour of the girls and are scolded by their father. Then Earwicker goes to bed after drinking too much, like the Finnegan of the ballad, and he is tormented by hundreds of dreams during the whole night. He dreams of being replaced by his two sons; his daughter, taking her mother's place, will be replaced by her own daughter, as the new father by new

sons, and so on indefinitely. *Finnegans Wake* is without beginning and end: it has a circular structure which the writer openly demonstrates by starting his narration with the last part of the sentence that he left unfinished on the last page.

## CHARACTERS

The characters are **defined not by their qualities but rather by their functions**. There is a fixed pattern of relationships, which determines a set of roles. This pattern receives a stable embodiment in terms of family relationships. The whole of human history, myth and ritual is presented in terms of this constant framework.

## STYLE

As *Finnegans Wake* was conceived according to the logic of a dream, **the different characters are often exchanged**, and the single idea, or better the memory of a single event, may take different shapes. The result is a **story which lacks a customary surface**: in a novel the reader expects a clear narrative, which holds the different parts; here, the reader is struck by the **continuous wordplay**, the **verbal extravagance**, the use of distortions, multilingual puns and examples from different languages, which Joyce created from his vast knowledge of history, old legends, myths, music, foreign languages and ancient dialects. However, the *Wake* is a work of harmonious words, which calls for reading aloud and appeals to ear and not to eye. The sentences are often of enormous length, constructed clause within clause with each clause in apparent digression, so that before the reader reaches the end of the sentence, he has lost its meaning.

Joyce himself stated that he could not use words and sentences in the ordinary connections because his aim was to 'express how things are in the night, in the different stages – conscious, then semi-conscious, then unconscious'. Therefore, the reader must overcome the pressure of chronological time, history and cultural heritage in order to enjoy the novel.



<b>Key idea</b>	To make Finnegan's family universal and place it in a distinctive religious, heroic and civic background, Joyce used analogy and parallelism as he had done in <i>Ulysses</i> . There, Homer provides the structure of Mr Bloom's day; here, Joyce called upon the Italian 18 <sup>th</sup> -century philosopher, Giambattista Vico's (1668-1744) theory of history. According to him, man's history proceeded cyclically through three phases: the first one is the divine, called <i>theocratic</i> , which produces religion and the family; the second stage is the heroic, or <i>aristocratic</i> , characterised by heroes and great men; the third phase is the human, also called <i>democratic</i> , distinguished	by the creation of cities, laws and civil obedience, but also followed by anarchy and chaos. After a <i>ricorso</i> , or period of reflux, the cycles begin again. This Viconian scheme provides Joyce with a sequence composed of three substantial stages followed by a dissolution. The overall structure of <i>Finnegans Wake</i> follows the same sequence, with three main books followed by a final short one in which the characters collapse. Therefore, the sense of life embodied in this work is of a process in which neither progress nor regress is possible. Life has a circular pattern in which the same characters and the same episodes come round again and again.
<b>Analogy and parallelism</b>		

### COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

#### 1 READ the texts and answer the following questions.

- Where does the title of the novel come from?
- What does *Finnegans Wake* tell? When does it take place?
- How are the characters defined?
- What are the most important stylistic features of the novel?
- What kind of structure does the novel follow?
- What does the Viconian scheme provide Joyce with?



## Riverrun

*The extract that follows is composed of the three opening paragraphs of the novel. They are centred on the man's falling asleep; at first the semi-conscious level can be detected, then the unconscious level overwhelms it.*

James Joyce  
*Finnegans Wake*  
(1939)

Part I, Chapter 1

riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore<sup>1</sup> to bend of bay, brings us by a commodius vicus<sup>2</sup> of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs.

- Sir Tristram, violer d'amores, fr'over the short sea, had passencore<sup>3</sup> rearrived from North Armorica on this side the scraggy isthmus of Europe Minor to wielderfight<sup>4</sup>
- 5 his penisolate war: nor had topsawyer's rocks<sup>5</sup> by the stream Oconee exaggerated themself<sup>6</sup> to Laurens County's gorgios<sup>7</sup> while they went doublin their mumper all the time: nor avoice from afire bellowsed mishe mishe to tauftauf thuartpeatrick<sup>8</sup>: not yet, though venissoon after, had a kidscad<sup>9</sup> buttended<sup>10</sup> a bland old isaac: not yet, though all's fair in vanessy, were sosie sesthers wroth with twone nathandjoe. Rot a peck<sup>11</sup> of
- 10 pa's malt had Jhem or Shen brewed by arlight and rory end to the regginbrow was to be seen ringsome on the aquaface.

The fall (bababadalgharaghtakamminarronkonnbronntonneronntuonn thunntrovarrhounawnskawntoohoochoordenenthurnuk!) of a once wallstrait oldparr is retaled<sup>12</sup> early in bed and later on life down through<sup>13</sup> all christian minstrelsy<sup>14</sup>.

1 **swerve of shore.** Piegare della spiaggia.

2 **commodius vicus.** Latinismo per 'agevole via'.

3 **passencore.** Dal francese 'pas encore', non ancora.

4 **wielderfight.** Dal tedesco 'wiederfechten', combattere ancora.

5 **rocks.** Forma colloquiale per 'denaro' e 'testicoli'.

6 **exaggerated themself.** Si accrebbero.

7 **gorgios.** Non zingari.

8 **thuartpeatrick.** Tu sei patrizio.

9 **kidskad.** Canaglia.

10 **buttended.** Protestato.

11 **Rot a peck.** Rutta un poco.

12 **retaled.** Raccontata.

13 **down through.** Più tardi nella vita.

14 **all christian minstrelsy.** Tutti i canti dei menestrelli cristiani.

**COMMENTARY**

**Lines 1-2:** The first sentence is the second half of the last of the novel: since the *Wake* is circular, end meets beginning. The word 'riverrun' is the central word of the book: it refers to a Dublin river, Anna Liffey, which is the feminine creative principle and it is the river of time and life. The Liffey flows past the church of Adam and Eve (here reversed to imply temptation, fall and renewal) and into Dublin bay (line 1: 'from swerve of shore to bend of bay'), where after flowing down to Bray, it circulates up to Howth Castle, which is a Dublin landmark, standing on the top of a high headland dominating the bay. 'Howth Castle and Environs', as the initials show, is H. C. Earwicker; for, as she is the river, he is hill and castle.

**Lines 3-6:** Sir Tristram refers to two important people: the first is Tristan who comes from North Armorica (lines 3-4), that is, North Brittany, to get Isolde to 'Europe Minor' (line 4), that is, Ireland; the second is Sir Almeric Tristram who came across the 'scraggy isthmus' (line 4) and founded Howth Castle. 'violer d'amores' (line 3) is Tristan as violator of love, but also a musical instrument with seven strings. 'rearrived' (line 3) implies the Viconian cycle: what has already happened, is going to happen again. 'topsawyer's rocks' (line 5) must be shamrock, the national emblem of Ireland; it also suggests Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer*, who, with Huck Finn, may represent the two opposing brothers, Shem and Shaun.

**Line 7:** The sentence in line 7 may be interpreted in two ways: it may refer to St Patrick who brought Christianity

to Ireland. The saint baptises ('taufauft' comes from the German 'taufen' meaning 'baptise') Ireland and from a fire below comes the voice of a girl saying 'mishe mishe', 'Myself, I am'.

**Line 8:** The heart of the fourth sentence is Jacob fooling Isaac and Esau with false hair, venison and kids. 'bland' combines 'blind' (Isaac), 'blond' (Finn), and 'blend'; for the father is a blend of his opposing sons. 'buttended' superimposes Irish politics: young Parnell (cad, or young son) displaced old Isaac Butt in Parliament as leader of the Home Rule Party.

**Line 9:** Here there is a reference to Swift's love for Vanessa, echoed by 'vanessy'. Swift is 'nathandjoe', an anagram for Jonathan; 'sosie sesters wroth' suggests the three Biblical names Susannah, Esther and Ruth who were loved by old men; 'twone' is a union of opposites.

**Lines 9-11:** Brewing and distilling proceed in Dublin, the brewing of Guinness, the distilling by 'Jhem or Shen' (line 10); 'arclight' (line 10) refers to Noah, a drunk; 'the regginbrow' (line 10), according to Joyce himself, is an eyebrow in the face of the water.

**Lines 12-14:** Vico's thunder is embodied in a word of one hundred letters, the first of ten thunders in the *Wake*. This one is composed of words for noise and thunder ('tuonnthunn'). 'oldparr' (line 13) refers to an incontinent centenarian of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The fall also suggests Adam's fall from the Garden of Eden.