



## Finnegans Wake by James Joyce: A Book Review

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### Abstract

This article provides a literary analysis of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, delving into its intricate narrative structure, linguistic complexity, and thematic depth. The novel, often regarded as one of the most challenging works in modern fiction, explores the cyclical nature of human history, drawing parallels between myth, history, and the collective unconscious. The analysis focuses on Joyce's use of dream language, multilingual wordplay, and the novel's dream-within-a-dream structure, revealing how these elements contribute to its enigmatic charm. The study also examines the novel's themes of death, resurrection, guilt, family, and cultural identity, emphasizing the interconnectedness of human experiences throughout history. Joyce's masterful use of dream language, multilingual wordplay, and dream-within-a-dream structure adds to the enigmatic charm of the work, drawing readers into a richly complex world where every element serves a purpose. As there is little research conducted on the use of language and existing multiple meanings in *Finnegans Wake*, this study is important to reveal a literary analysis of the novel. Despite its complexity, *Finnegans Wake* emerges as a timeless masterpiece that defies traditional literary conventions, offering a unique and thought-provoking reading experience that continues to captivate and intrigue readers, making it a lasting contribution to the world of literature.

**Keywords:** James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, Irish Literature, Irish Fiction, modern fiction.

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## **A Literary Analysis of *Finnegans Wake* by James Joyce**

*Finnegans Wake* is “Joyce’s most ambitious literary endeavor” (Rollyson, 1983) and “Joyce’s last and most difficult work” (Benstock, 1965). In *Finnegans Wake* Joyce proves his deep vision of human history and experience. In this review, *Finnegans Wake* is discussed through a literary analysis that is the examination and evaluation of the elements and structure of a literary work. Literary analysis involves a careful consideration and interpretation of the various components that make up a piece of literature, such as plot, characters, setting, themes, symbols, and language. The goal of literary analysis is to understand how these elements contribute to the overall meaning and impact of a literary work. As there is little research conducted on the use of language and multiple meanings in *Finnegans Wake*, this study is important to reveal a literary analysis of the novel.

*Finnegans Wake* by James Joyce is one of the masterpieces in modern fiction. Modern fiction typically refers to works of fiction that were written in the 20th and 21st centuries, encompassing a broad range of styles, themes, and literary techniques. The term modern fiction is often used to distinguish literary works produced during this period from those of earlier literary movements, such as the Victorian or Romantic Eras. *Finnegans Wake* is a manifestation of the dreaming collective psyche and it addresses key issues in myth and history. Joyce began writing *Finnegans Wake* in 1923 and published it in 1939; he spent sixteen years for composing the novel. His use of dream language and stream of unconsciousness technique present the high virtuosity of the novel. This type of dream language used in the novel is based on Hiberno-English. It is a set of English dialects spoken in Ireland.

The novel begins with the fall of giant Finnegan. When he awakens, he finds himself as a modern man and a pub owner named H.C.E. There are a few variations for his name; the first one is H. C. Earwicker. The rest are Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker, Haroun Childeric Eggebert, Haveth Childers Everywhere, and Here Comes Everybody. “*Finnegans Wake* is Joyce’s descent into the underworld of history” (Verene, 2003). Finnegan’s Fall symbolizes not only the Fall of Christ but also the Fall of Humanity into history. However, it is “an abrupt fall, without any clear purpose: an act of chance, an accident” (Verene, 2003). Then, he finds himself in the dream of history. In this sense, his characterization is parallel with Stephen’s in *Ulysses* who claims that history is a nightmare from which he is trying to awake.

*Finnegans Wake* addresses each phase of human history and it is like an encyclopedia of information. It is a novel of many moods in a high degree of obscurity, and it has many exits and entrances. Some parts of the book are, to a certain extent, clear such as the portrait of Shem or the fable of the Ondt and the Gracehoper. Others, such as the opening chapter, are dense especially for the first-time readers. Some parts, such as A.L.P.’s departure, are formed with poetic prose of high beauty. This use of language makes the novel a challenging literary work for both its writer and its reader:

James Joyce probably admired Finn for the same reasons that drew him to *Ulysses* (qualities he found lacking in Christ) - that they were all-round men: Finn was a son, a husband, a father, even a grandfather, a poet as well as a soldier, and (significantly) a corpse (Benstock, 1978).

Finn’s attempts to return to life and join the revelry again are appreciated by Joyce. He regards Finn as a man who completes Christ since he has what Christ does not have. His becoming a father, a grandfather, a poet, a soldier, and a corpse suggests that he is more human than Christ. Joyce’s words prove this idea: “Now be aisy, good Mr Finnimore, sir. And take your laysure like a god on pension and don't be walking abroad” (2012). He implicitly displays to the reader that he addresses Christ by employing a round character named Finnegan.

“*Finnegans Wake* sets out to express in appropriate form and language the collective unconsciousness” (Rollyson, 1983); the novel covers all human experience reflected in a set of reoccurring form by using a universal language that is called dream language. However, this dream language is used with some expressions from several languages: “*Finnegans Wake* makes repeated use of words and phrases in more than sixty languages and isolated use of many other languages” (Verene, 2003). The references to multiple languages imply that the reader of the book needs to have a certain

culture to clearly understand the deep meanings implied in Joyce's words. In this sense, one needs "two thinks at a time" (Verene, 2003) when reading Joyce's cleverly created puns.

Likewise, the characters of the novel cannot be identified simply. Shem, Shaun, or H.C.E. figures are not clearly presented; their identity depends on the reader's perspective. For instance, "Swift sometimes seems to be Shem, sometimes Shaun, and sometimes H.C.E. The Biblical Shem is sometimes the FW Shem, but sometimes he is Shaun, when the FW Shem is Ham [...] We can never be sure which archetype is represented by what historical figure" (Epstein, 1966). Joyce implies this idea clearly in the novel as he states: "that sword of certainty which would indentifide the body never falls" (2012).

The impenetrability of *Finnegans Wake* proves Joyce's intention of writing this novel; he plans to give a certain shape to the sleeping process. Thus, Joyce might not have expected his work to be read in an effortless way; or he might not think of any critic to have clearly analyzed what he wrote. Wordplay in the novel is multilingual, etymological, associative, and acoustic. Therefore, "as Joyce intended, the writing in *Finnegans Wake* is not just to be seen but to be read aloud" (Verene, 2003); that is, reading *Finnegans Wake* helps the reader appreciate its language and exceed the limits of his/her imagination.

The meanings in *Finnegans Wake* are presented through its language. They are developed with "a great network of multiple puns that echo themes back and forth throughout the book" (Stallworthy and Ramazani, 2006). In the novel, there are strong parallels between popular and intellectual culture, Irish and world politics, and trivial and momentous events. The outstanding point here is that all these issues are all served with a dream language. Each element in the novel is meaningful and a part of the total design of the novel. Gerhart summarizes the structure of the novel as follows:

The distinctive aesthetic of the book – its multi-faceted plot narrative, Protean individuals and ambient archetypes, outrageous puns, and word-plays – not only assists but in fact constitutes a simultaneously fantastic and fascinating re-ordering of historical facts, fantasy, myth, and consciousness (1962).

As suggested above, with his playful language, Joyce presents the historical facts in an order and wants his readers to realize the parallels between his world of fantasy and the historical events.

*Finnegans Wake* is not a novel with traditional characters and plot; "the careful reading of a single passage, even out of context, will convey more than any summary of the 'plot'" (Stallworthy and Ramazani, 2006). Earwicker and his family are contemporary representatives of great allegory. Readers face with the anxiety and confusion of their dreams and no character in the novel has as a unique, constant personality. Likewise, perspectives are continuously changing in parallel with collective unconscious. Hence, Earwicker symbolizes every man; he can be identified with all the characters. He is Adam in the Bible, the Finn Mac Cool of Irish myth, or any historical figure that his readers guess he is. There might be a dozen of interpretations about his identity. In this sense, "*Finnegans Wake* is about anybody, anywhere, anytime" (Tindall, 1969); indeed, "the reader of *Finnegans Wake* has to grope after identities and values in their successiveness and coincidence" (Gerhart, 1962).

The novel is divided into four books and has five primary dreamers. One is a Dublin pub keeper, Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker (H.C.E.). "H.C.E. is a faller, like Adam; like Jesus" (Tindall, 3). The name H.C.E. here suggests 'Here Comes Everybody' addressing that this is a story of an ordinary man; this is a story of no man, as well. Another main character is his wife Anna Livilia Plurabelle (A.L.P.). She is the one who wakes Earwicker at his wake; therefore, "she (A.L.P.) is the river – of life and time" (Tindall, 1969). The rest are their twin sons Shem and Shaun, and their daughter Issy. Shem and Shaun are presented as the rival siblings; their rivalry "represents all wars and debates in man's history" (Tindall, 1969).

H.C.E. is an archetypal husband-father who is responsible for all the nightmares in the novel. After an obscure indiscretion in the Phoenix Park which symbolizes the 'original sin' he becomes a symbol character for Adam in the Bible. This crime that makes H.C.E. feel guilty throughout the novel

is a type of “unknown crime” (Lacivita, 2014). However, the news of this sin is carried with rumors, documents, lectures and arguments and this transformation presents a parallel with the holy books in human history since most of them refer to ‘Original Sin’.

Phoenix Park has a crucial function in the novel. It not only symbolizes the Garden of Eden but also becomes a “spot for Finn’s resurrection” (Benstock, 1978). Joyce uses the park as a functional setting: “Let be buttercup eve lit by night in the Phoenix! Music. And old lotts have funn at Flammagen’s ball. Till Irinwakes from Slumber Deep” (Joyce, 2012). According to Benstock, Joyce puts his story in a capsule since he chooses Phoenix Park as a starting point of everything:

The Fall from Grace (eve) will result in a rebirth (Phoenix), the bird rising from its flames (Flammagen’s), the wake after Tim Finnegan’s fall from a ladder (“Lots of fun at Finnegan’s wake”) will echo the political awakening of Ireland (Thomas Davis’s “The West’s Asleep”) personified in the warrior Finn (funn) (Benstock, 1965).

The cycle suggested above proves that the whole story of the novel begins again when it finishes (Finn-again). In this sense, Phoenix Park symbolizes the rebirth as well as the birth of Christ. In the beginning, there were Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden; they were “our first parents” (Tindall, 1969). At Phoenix Park there are H.C.E. and A.L.P.; Joyce states that they are “our forced payrents” (2012). The time of the novel is questioned by its writer with the notions of ‘first’ and ‘last’. The first human addresses the figures of Adam and Eve as well as Finnegan and Anna. Last human addresses the youngest character in the novel, Shaun. However, when Shaun comes to the end of his journey, he witnesses his birth. In this sense, Shaun also becomes the last human.

According to Gerhart there are “three principal dream layers in the book: we drop from one dream layer to another” (1962). The first of these layers is the Dreamer’s dream about everything occurring in the novel. He never wakes and the reader is never out of his dream. The second one is the Dreamer’s dream about Earwicker’s dream about Shaun’s tale told by the Donkey. When Shaun himself falls asleep Earwicker’s dream is interrupted. However, the revelations about Earwicker start again in the process of Shaun’s dream. Thus, the reader is faced with the third dream layer in the novel: The Dreamer’s dream about Earwicker’s dream about Shaun’s dream. In this third layer, Shaun is presented as Earwicker’s past and future, which addresses the idea that the son and the father are the same.

The story of the novel takes place in the process of one night’s dream of the five dreamers. During the night time these characters undergo a series of metamorphoses. Fears, desires, conflicts, and confusions of these family members address social and political themes of the modern era. The concept of modern man is presented through the process of the whole development of humanity when they pass the four phases of history. Their visual journey symbolizes the unity of individual and collective development.

“To various people who approached Joyce while he was writing *Finnegans Wake* and publishing it in installments, asking him how to understand it, his advice was always to read Vico’s *Scienza nuova*” (Verene, 2003). This theory is commonly known as “The New Science”. It is explained by Tindall as follows: “Vico concluded that man’s history, created by man under the laws of divine providence, proceeds cyclically through three ages, the divine, heroic, and human. After a ricorso or period of reflux, the cycle begins again, saecula saeculorum” (1969). The New Science also addresses “the four-phase cycle of the human history: theocratic, aristocratic, democratic, anarchic, and thence via a ricorso to the theocratic once again” (Rollyson, 1983). This cycle is obviously parallel with Joyce’s cycle of human history and the idea of ‘eternal return of everything’ in the novel.

*Finnegans Wake* could be interpreted as a mere dream book by some readers; however, it is one of the masterpieces of the twentieth century. “It is indeterminate, untranslatable, irreducible. It is a work in which every single element has a function: It contains no nonsense yet is finally beyond explication” (Rollyson, 1983). Not only its use of stream of unconsciousness technique but also its plot structure makes the novel complicated and incomprehensible. Each part of the novel has a function and tells one story of the humankind through the use of imagism, impressionism, or

symbolism. Therefore, it would not be wrong to state that Joyce ignored the difficulties that his readers would face while reading this masterpiece.

*Finnegans Wake* is Joyce's "mythological-psychological novel" (Rollyson, 1983). He uses a literary language that is mostly suitable for cultured readers in the novel. His former literary works and *Finnegans Wake* that could be accepted as a breakthrough for fiction are masterpieces of modern British fiction. They are still subject to analysis for postmodern readers and critics; and Joyce's way of writing fiction is what makes a literary work a high-quality production.

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