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## An Illuminating Guide to Joyce

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## An Illuminating Guide to Joyce

COLIN MACCABE: *James Joyce: A Very Short Introduction*.

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### Michael Sacks

Colin MacCabe makes a valuable contribution to Joyce scholarship in *James Joyce: A Very Short Introduction*. This book's abundant information, perceptive commentary, and eloquent prose make it an absolute masterpiece.

The first of the book's six chapters focuses on Joyce's struggles to get *Ulysses* published and the controversies surrounding this landmark of modernism. The next four chapters explore Joyce's major works in chronological order: *Dubliners* (1914), *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), *Ulysses* (1922), and *Finnegans Wake* (1939). The sixth and final chapter reflects on Joyce's legacy, influence, and stature as a writer.

Although this book does not have a chapter exclusively devoted to Joyce's life, MacCabe incorporates pertinent biographical information into each chapter. The seamless infusion of biographical material into the literary criticism marks one of the book's many strengths. For example, in the chapter on *Finnegans Wake*, MacCabe presents a captivating account of Joyce dealing with his daughter Lucia's mental illness while working feverishly to complete *Finnegans Wake*, which Joyce considered "his magnum opus," according to MacCabe (90). MacCabe points out here that Joyce perceived *Finnegans Wake* as the apex of his career, even though *Ulysses* is (and has been for a long time) Joyce's most renowned and acclaimed book. This type of revelation, prevalent throughout MacCabe's book, helps those who are casually acquainted with Joyce to cultivate a more nuanced understanding of the paragon of Irish modernism.

Every chapter in this book offers substantial insight into Joyce's achievements as a writer. Chapter one highlights the threats and the challenges that Joyce and his supporters faced when trying to publish *Ulysses*. According to MacCabe, several people risked imprisonment by attempting to publish and to distribute the novel. Among the most prominent of these people were Jane Heap and Margaret Anderson, the editors of the *Little Re-*

view, the literary magazine that published episodes of the novel in serial form. Heap and Anderson put themselves at risk for their advocacy of a novel that the censors deemed obscene. As MacCabe points out, the threat of censorship was nothing new to Joyce, who had faced hostile resistance when trying to publish *Dubliners*.

MacCabe's chapter on *Dubliners* traces the development of the stories in Joyce's collection and examines their complexity. Although *Dubliners* is sometimes perceived as Joyce's most accessible work, MacCabe emphasizes that the fifteen stories in the collection resist straightforward interpretations. MacCabe analyzes "Eveline" as an example of the complexity of the stories in *Dubliners*. According to MacCabe, "Eveline" had traditionally been interpreted as a story of paralysis, but then the critic Hugh Kenner proposed a different interpretation of the story—one that reads the ending of the story as the title character's escape (16). Critics remain divided on the issue of how to interpret the ending of this story, and MacCabe suggests that this lack of a clear resolution makes "Eveline" typical of the stories in *Dubliners*: "Time and again in *Dubliners* we are confronted with alternative readings which cannot be resolved" (16). This chapter on *Dubliners* makes it clear that Joyce's first book constitutes a substantial literary feat.

MacCabe does a masterful job of pinpointing the similarities and the differences among Joyce's works. The opening of the chapter on *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* showcases this aspect of MacCabe's work. After explaining that Joyce started writing *A Portrait* at the same time that he was working on the stories in *Dubliners*, MacCabe stresses that this concurrence is "astonishing" considering that Joyce's first two books are "antithetical in form" (25). MacCabe expounds upon one of the crucial differences between the two books: "While in *Dubliners* Joyce worked at creating a new style which abandoned narrative and identity in favor of a more precise evocation of time and place, *Stephen Hero* [the provisional title of *A Portrait*] is the narrative of an identity—the identity of the writer" (25-26). One can discern the nuance of MacCabe's analysis of *A Portrait* in his deft comparison between Stephen Dedalus [the protagonist of *A Portrait*] and James Joyce. On the one hand, MacCabe characterizes *A Portrait* as "strongly autobiographical" (32). At the same time, however, MacCabe emphasizes a substantial difference in temperament between Joyce and Dedalus: "The isolated, sensitive, and largely melancholy individual who stalks the pages of *A Portrait* has little to do with 'Sunny Jim,' which was his family's nickname for James—the one member of the Joyce family who was bound to be in a good mood" (32). As in the other chapters, MacCabe integrates elements of Joyce's life and personality in such a way that illuminates Joyce's fiction—while resisting the temptation to read

Joyce's work as purely autobiographical.

In the chapter on *Ulysses*, MacCabe explains the innovative way in which Joyce adapts Homer's *Odyssey* to the form of a modernist novel. Whereas Homer's epic poem takes place over several years, Joyce's epic novel unfolds over one day: June 16, 1904. According to MacCabe, "[The] adventures [in *Ulysses*] all occur within the familiar setting of Dublin and abandon traditional notions of the heroic epic to find a new kind of heroism in the ordinary everyday life of the modern city" (39). MacCabe makes a convincing case that Joyce introduces a new kind of heroism in *Ulysses*. In addition to tracing the influence of Homer on *Ulysses*, MacCabe cites two other influences on Joyce's epic novel: Shakespeare and Dante. In this chapter, MacCabe also provides useful historical context, suggesting that Joyce's condemnation of violence in *Ulysses* provides an implicit commentary on the violence of World War I and the Irish War of Independence (39-40). MacCabe argues that *Ulysses* showcases Joyce's linguistic versatility, claiming that the novel features both "literary language" and "a jumble of contemporary slang" (65). This linguistic versatility would prove to be an integral component of Joyce's next novel as well.

The chapter on *Finnegans Wake* provides a discerning discussion of why Joyce's final novel—the product of seventeen years of assiduous labor—merits such critical acclaim. Many casual readers of Joyce find the experimentalism and the multilingual nature of *Finnegans Wake* off-putting. While acknowledging the *Wake's* opacity, MacCabe makes the novel appealing by illuminating Joyce's technique and by emphasizing the value of the novel's complexity. To a larger extent than some of the other chapters in MacCabe's book, the chapter on *Finnegans Wake* provides plot summary and a description of the major characters. This information is beneficial to help readers make sense of a novel that is widely considered one of the most inscrutable in the history of literature written in English.

MacCabe refutes the notion that *Finnegans Wake* signals an abrupt departure from Joyce's earlier works. MacCabe outlines the conventional perception of *Finnegans Wake* and offers a convincing rebuttal:

Many critics have complained that Joyce's last book marks a major change from his earlier work and that his interest in language had become a self-indulgent aberration. However, all Joyce's writing focuses on the methods by which identity is produced in language.... [Joyce's] earlier works and their experiments with narrative and

language made the writing of *Finnegans Wake* possible.... Both his methods and his topics remain remarkably constant throughout his adult life. (76-77)

This commentary identifies some of the salient features of Joyce's corpus and elucidates the fact that *Finnegans Wake* demonstrates these features. MacCabe's discussion of how *Finnegans Wake* fits into Joyce's body of work indicates the depth of the erudition contained in this book.

In the book's final chapter, MacCabe evaluates Joyce's legacy and impact. MacCabe underscores the fact that *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* continues to exert a major impact in the present day: "*A Portrait's* appeal ... is not limited by nationality or even religion. Joyce's account of the growth of an individual soul and body in opposition to the authorities who demand vows of obedience continues to reach audiences of contemporary American teenagers" (98). MacCabe suggests here that Joyce's work can inspire people to confront unjust or oppressive authority. Later in this chapter, he assesses the stature of *Ulysses* in the literary canon: "*Ulysses* is very widely recognized as one of the greatest novels of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Many, myself included, would count it as the greatest" (100). In addition to evaluating Joyce's individual works, MacCabe also reflects on Joyce's body of work as a whole. MacCabe argues that one of the many distinctive facets of Joyce's work is his exceptional "command of the sounds of the English language" (103). Anyone who wonders why Joyce is so revered in literary circles can find a thorough and persuasive explanation in this chapter.

Throughout the book, MacCabe discusses some of the most influential people in Joyce's life and career. These people include Nora Barnacle (Joyce's wife and muse), Harriet Shaw Weaver (Joyce's patron), John Quinn (Joyce's lawyer), Sylvia Beach (one of Joyce's publishers), Paul Leon (Joyce's amanuensis), and Frank Budgen (one of Joyce's close friends). MacCabe's descriptions of these people and his explanations of their connections with Joyce comprise an appealing feature of the book.

Another major strength of the book is its annotated bibliography. MacCabe offers trenchant evaluations of numerous works of scholarship on Joyce. Among the works that MacCabe highlights as monumental achievements are Richard Ellmann's *James Joyce*, John McCourt's *The Years of Bloom: James Joyce in Trieste, 1904-1920*, Margot Norris's *Suspicious Readings of Joyce's Dubliners*, Seamus Deane's introduction to the edition of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* that Deane edited, Weldon Thornton's *Allusions in Ulysses: An Annotated List*, and Roland McHugh's *Annotations to Finnegans Wake*. MacCabe's annotated bibliography provides a helpful resource for those who

want to continue their study of Joyce.

Just as the aforementioned books have heightened our understanding of Joyce and his work, so too does MacCabe's book. *James Joyce: A Very Short Introduction* should be considered essential reading for a class on Joyce and for anyone who wants to learn about Joyce. For this book's perceptive analysis, erudite scholarship, and insightful commentary, Colin MacCabe deserves the utmost praise.

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