

## HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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### **James Joyce** (1882-1941) *The Dead; Ulysses* (B, 2498-2573)

James Joyce was born in Dublin, son of a father who, though talented, had difficulty earning a living. Consequently the family moved from home to home, each one successively shabbier. Joyce studied voraciously to break from what he considered to be the intellectual shabbiness of Dublin. In rejecting Dublin, he embraced continental Europe, and sought to shape his mind into a new way of thinking, and in doing so reinvent literature. To do so required a fervent and unwavering belief in his own genius, which his circle of friends found trying at times.

Joyce's first significant work, *The Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*, dates from 1914, and concludes with the story "The Dead." His greatest work, *Ulysses*, was first published in book form on February 2, 1922, Joyce's fortieth birthday. The book contains innovations in organization, style and narrative technique that have influenced countless other writers; and yet for all that Joyce had difficulty with publication; his work was considered obscene by the U.S. Post Office. Eventually, bans were lifted and the book circulated more freely (2500). Joyce's last major work, *Finnegans Wake* (1939), took him fourteen years to write, and strives to encapsulate a world history in the dreams of a certain publican named Humphrey Earwicker.

*Question: What is the connection between The Dead and Ulysses?*

This question has a schoolish ring to it, but goes to the heart of Joyce's development. Here is my answer. Gabriel, in "The Dead", is a fully developed form of the character Joyce imagined as himself. In Joyce's first published set of tales, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1914), one Stephen Dedalus, later a major figure in *Ulysses*, assumes the personality which will become Gabriel's: detached, wistful, forced to learn his own artistic mission as an observer of life. That is the personality that will make of Stephen Dedalus in *Ulysses* a fit base for explorations, through a language made up of languages, puns, and allusions, of the whole frame of human history. As the title of that epic search indicates, Homer's Odysseus (*Ulysses*, through Latin) is the final everyman, virtuous and vulgar in all the essential mixtures, but at the same time an observer, like Gabriel and Stephen. The Gabriel personality will tightly link "The Dead" to *Ulysses*.

*Comparative Literature:*

1. Our first reflection concerns literary/cultural history. Is literature a direct reflection of its time? Or has literature a history that is basically independent of its time? (I recommend a look at Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), as an aid to understanding how literature is felt and created from within the practitioner standing in a long line of predecessors.) The spur of this question, in the case of Joyce, is *where did he come from?* The last writer we read, Gerard Manley Hopkins, was just leaving the world as Joyce entered it, but do they seem to belong to the same cultural thread? (Certainly both writers were "experimental" in form, but is that the end of their mutual connection?) Or is the dramatic cultural explosion of the 20th century, described at the beginning of this unit, enough to account for major changes in literary style? Reflection on this concrete instance will be a portal to thinking through the entire critical question of *the place of literature in culture*.

2. In *Ulysses*, as the title indicates, Joyce intends to wade deeply into ancient Greek myth. Most of the characters and scenes in the novel play off against counterparts in Homer's *Odyssey*, which is the epic of a quasi hero's return to his home, after struggles in war, temptations en route, and a host of self-doubts. Familiarize yourself with these parallels, but then consider what can be the reason for this kind of use of older myth in a modern text. Does this kind of inter-textual reference permit Joyce to enrich his own text? To add extra layers of meaning to his own work? Does this last question raise yet another: is literature in some sense about literature, more than it is about life? Suggested reading: *Hereditas: Seven Essays on The Modern Experience of the Classical*, 1964, ed. Frederic Will.